

アガオ!

SP×3

成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

イラスト:ヤスタスズヒト
Illustration: Suzuhito Yasuda

AWA STUDIO WORKS BONTAGE

成田良悟

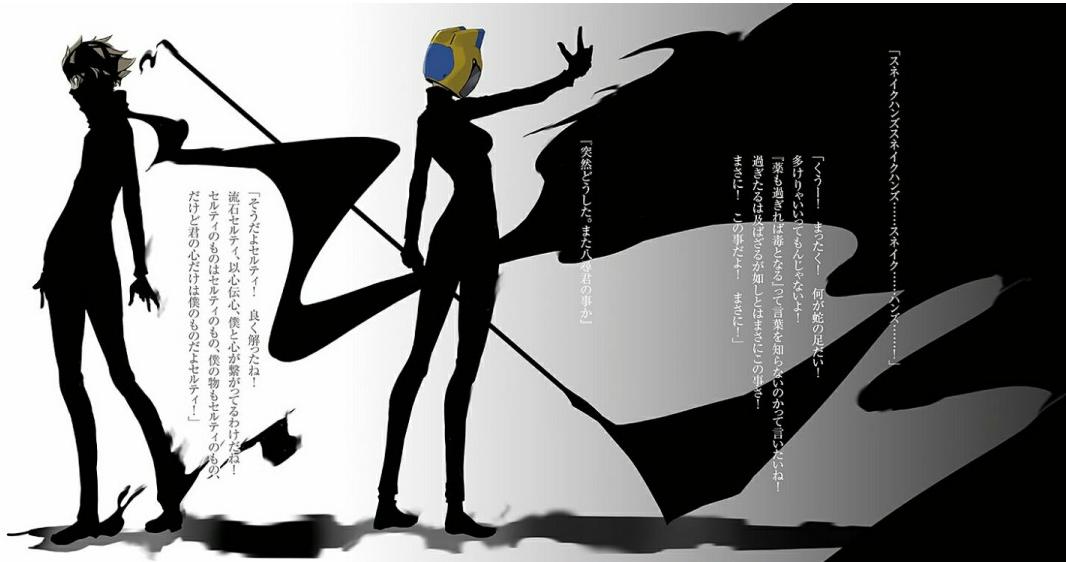
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「……普段は冷静なくせに、どうして八尋君の事になる這麼熱くなるんだ



「スネイクハンズスネイクハンズ……スネイク……パンパン……」

「くうー……まぶたー……何が私の足だい！
多けりやい（もんじ）でないよ！
『薬も迷れば毒となる』で言葉を知らねえのかて言いたいね！
過ぎたるは及ばざるが如してはまさにこのまさか……
まさか……この事だよ……まさかに……」

「突然じうした。また八尋君の事が」

P17 序章 偉大な一步を踏み出そう
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Design:Yoshihiko Kamebe



「アブビは悪くないんすよ！ アブビは！」

「遊馬騎達とどういう繋がりか知らねえし、詐索もしねえけどよ……
まあ、友達は選べよ？」

「悪役の方に影響受けたのかもね」。

Words of a Certain Informant

I love humans.

It's something I've said countless times before.

Hito LOVE. I love humans.

It might sound corny, but I'll keep saying it.

I really do love humans, so I don't know any other way to put it, anyway.

You could even say I'm a fan.

Yeah, a fan of humans.

— “*I'm a fan of humans!*”

...There was a famous movie with this line, remember?

A demon played by a famous actor said it to provoke a very serious human boy; that he was a fan of humans.

I'm not a demon, just a typical human with no special abilities whatsoever, but I'm a fan of humans, too.

We could even say all humans are fans of humans. Don't you think so?

To be a fan means to have a degree of fanaticism, after all; infatuation.

Humans are often infatuated by other humans.

There are probably people who would deny that.

Of course there are. That's how humans should be.

There will be people who hate humanity more than they can bear, and people who could care less about humanity.

But even that hatred, even that apathy, is a form of 'infatuation'.

Infatuation; that is to say, 'heat' and 'madness'. Do you understand?

(*Infatuation(熱狂); heat(熱) + madness(狂))

To be maddened by the heat itself. To be maddened by exposure to the heat.

And also, sometimes—the heat within yourself goes mad.

The heat you have for other humans grows out of control.

There's the overheated type, like me, that ends up loving humanity itself.

There's the overfrozen type that hates humanity.

Even the type that, regardless of environ, remains neither hot nor cold, always lukewarm; that kind of heat modulation is mad in its own way.

To be in awe of nature, to feel the terror in being attacked by a wild beast... a personality that has undergone such things sometimes goes beyond human.

But the only thing that can alter the passion one has for humankind is humanity itself.

Let's take an example; say there's a man who says, 'Everyone around me is tedious scum. Nothing is interesting.'

If you asked me, I'd say this person's actually been strongly influenced by other humans.

Because the people around him have evoked the emotion of 'tedium' within him.

It's easier said than done to exert a long-term emotional influence, you know?

If you've hated a kind of food since childhood, it'd be hard to change your tastes spontaneously, right?

For humankind to constantly evoke 'tedium' in this man must take quite some energy, I think.

Think about it.

Watching a lump of rock is boring, but that's because the rock doesn't move.

But humans are in constant motion. It's in their nature that the more you look at them, the more facets you discover.

To constantly find them banal regardless takes some serious effort.

Does that sound like nonsense?

Well, that's expected. I made it up on the spot.

To be honest, I don't mind what others say.

What's important is what I myself think, isn't it?

I love humans. Yes; I love them.

So it'd be nice if humans love me back. I've said that in the past, too.

To have a mutual love with all of humanity would be a wonderful thing.

Whether their love is to have the kindness to accept me.

Whether it's love that denigrates and hurts me.

Whether it's love that ignores me.

Love has no form? Do you really think so? Really?

Love has a form. It's simply that that form is ever-changing.

That's what I want to prove to everyone.

In other words, I just want to associate with people. Move people around, churn the world up like natto, and entangle myself as much as I can with the human connections that result.

And because of that want, I became who I am now.

To be mutually infatuated is a good thing. A very good thing.

Even if law or society denounces it, I will always acknowledge it.

So you can be as infatuated as you wish.

You can love others, hate them, be dispassionate entirely.

Because all of those forms are equally valuable.



「偉大な一步を踏み出そう」

Prologue

The being wandered the streets aimlessly.

Another step.

To change itself, to take just another step forward.

To willingly cross the line drawn from thin ink, stretching from the farthest reaches of its own brain.

Or even: to ground that line beneath its foot.

♂♀

Midnight. Somewhere in the city.

“Huh? Hey, look at that, look.”

It was night time in Tokyo Ward 23.

Despite being at the heart of the city, it was dark.

An adult couple was strolling along the narrow road leading into a certain park when they encountered the ‘being’ walking at the end of the road.

“Huh...? What’s that?”

“That’s, uh, what was it? That character from the zombie film?”

“Ohh ohh ohh! The Ikebukuro one!”

On this otherwise deserted path, it was a silhouette in full-body mascot pajamas that had caught their attention.

The costume as a whole appeared to be designed after an owl, with a special hood that completely enveloped the wearer’s head.

With the stranger’s face so concealed, it was impossible to read he, or perhaps her, expression.

“What was the character called? Dark something. The bad guy, the evil zombie...”

“Is that a cosplay?”

As they spoke, the couple went past the stranger dressed as a movie character.

There were now and then people like this who walked around wearing mascot pajamas themed after some character, or a cat or bunny. It was an occasional sight around 60 Storey Street and such even without any event going on.

The couple had assumed this person was returning home from a friend’s party, or filming something for a video sharing site—

But these theories were quickly quashed.

The first to feel the blow was the man—

And the first to notice something wrong was the woman.

For at the same time the man felt the blow to his head, before he could realise what had

gone wrong, he lost consciousness.

“Eh... ah... what?”

The woman saw the man’s body fall forward to the ground, accompanied by the sound of blunt impact.

As well as the person in the mascot pajamas, who had come up behind him without their noticing.

Clutched in the stranger’s hand was a metal hammer, wrapped in bandages.

“...”

Still silent, the stranger in the costume raised the hammer.

“Wait... IyaaaAAAaaaAA!”

The woman screamed and tried to run, only to trip over her boyfriend’s body and fall to the ground.

As she struggled to stand she turned her head, and saw their assaulter once more.

—I remember.

She felt as if her entire body was paralysed; as if time itself had slowed.

And while in this state, she suddenly remembered.

What the mascot pajamas she saw had been designed after.

—Yes, I remember now.

—It started off as an anime or manga, not the movie.

The woman usually worked at a cabaret club in Ikebukuro.

A young hostess that had recently joined was a fan of the work—she often brought the anime merchandise or manga volumes into the dressing room.

It had been adapted to a live action movie a few years ago, and since it had become a huge hit, the woman had lent a ear to the summary so as to be able to discuss it with her customers should it come up.

She had thought it might arise in conversation with her customers because the original work was an anime staged in Ikebukuro where her workplace was, and the filming locations for the film were largely in Ikebukuro also.

—Its name, it was...

Even as her body thrashed and sought escape, the woman’s mind was desperately fixed on remembering.

She had the strangest notion that if only she could remember, she could escape.

Perhaps some part of her hoped that simply putting a name to this unknown attacker would attenuate her fear—

But no one, not even she herself, knew just what her jumbled mind was thinking in that moment.

—Yes! I remember! I remember!

“D... D-da... Dark Owlubua”

At the same time she whispered the name, the hammer came down upon her skull.

♂♀

The next day.

'Next on the news. We have an update on the serial assault case ongoing in Tokyo.'

'The woman injured has regained consciousness. From her testimony, it has been determined that the perpetrator was dressed as a cartoon character. Police Headquarters urges witnesses to come forth—'

♂♀

10 days later.

'Next on the news we have the Tokyo serial assault case. A man was struck by another man with a dull weapon walking on a street in Toshima Ward. The injury is severe and will take 2 months to recover—'

'From the modus operandi and witness reports, the police are working with the possibility that the culprit is the same one behind the serial assaults that occurred in the past weeks—'

'According to eyewitness reports, the perpetrator was dressed as a movie character—'

♂♀

15 days later.

'A follow-up on the serial assault case. Yet another attack has occurred.'

'The perpetrator appears to be dressed as a character from a popular animation which was adapted to film just this February—'

'This brings the victim count to seven—'

'Maou Publishing, which publishes the manga the anime was based off, has made the following statement: "We wish the victims a speedy recovery. We are deeply regretful about this incident and hope the police can resolve the situation as soon as possible."'

'In our previous segment, it was stated that the OPD anime was spun off from the manga. This is erroneous; the comic was an adaption. We apologise for the mistake.'

♂♀

20 days later.

'The work under scrutiny as of late, 'Owl of the Peeping Dead, also known as OPD, is a multi-faceted project created by design company Walking With Wizards, also called WWW, that originated on the web, and has spawned an exceedingly popular anime.'

‘Today we have anime critic Ushidaira Jackson here with us for a commentary.’

‘Thank you for having me.’

‘Ushidaira-san. This is the character merchandise the assaulter has been said to be wearing, the pajamas supposedly resembling the character Dark Owl... Is this mascot suit themed after the character in the series?’

‘Not quite. Rather than themed, it’s more that the actual character wears a hooded suit with this exact design. The character’s face is never shown, so you could consider the costume itself representative of the character.’

‘Thank you. The live action film adaption of this series has also achieved tremendous popularity, recognised even in other countries—but the depictions of violence in the anime and manga, as well as the film, have been criticised since this incident—’



Ikebukuro West Gate. Karaoke Pasela. Private room.

‘OPD did nothing wrong! Nothing!’

A slit-eyed man said this vehemently, shaking his fists.

“It’s true that it has more violent content than usual for Maou Publishing’s shōnen manga, but the violence only happens to the zombies, and the premise of the story is that the main character who’s kept his sentience despite dying and becoming a zombie tries to handle the humans who try to kill him in a non-violent way! If you go around hitting people with a hammer you’ve failed to understand the series completely!”

At that point, the woman sitting beside him said with a calm expression,

“Maybe it was the bad guy that influenced the criminal. He was dressed as Dark Owl, right?”

“Kuh... Dark Owl might be a villain planning to overtake Ikebukuro by controlling the zombies, but still... But still, he’s a complete villain! If someone turns to evil because he wants to be a villain like that, it’s no longer the influence of manga that’s the problem—he’s already irredeemably corrupt! What I’m trying to say is... OPD is an interesting series!”

In contrast, the person sitting across the zealously chattering slit-eyed man wore an unflappable expression.

“Right.”

Replying so shortly was a boy in a Raira Academy uniform—Mizuchi Yahiro.

He replied in this manner not for any contempt of the man; it was simply that he had no idea how to answer and had decided to just acknowledge the man’s words for now.

As the slit-eyed man continued to argue the manga series’ case, Yahiro was neither moved nor apathetic; he only continued to listen very seriously.

This was Yahiro’s first meeting with this man.

At first glance what he was saying might have seemed fine to ignore, but Yahiro soaked up

his words with as much focus as if the man was his own schoolteacher. How did he, a high school boy, end up listening to the gourches of this stranger in a karaoke box?

Work.

It was as simple as that.

For this was a component of the part-time job he had chosen to join just minutes ago.

章

「スネイクハンズへようこそ」



Chapter 1

Welcome to Snake Hands

Late April. Ikebukuro. Sunshine 60 Road.

“Snake Hands? What’s that? A Tokyu Hands ripoff?”

Ikebukuro was anticipating the upcoming Golden Week.

In a restaurant gradually filling out with the evening rush, a high schooler said this.

It was in this typical gossip between high schoolers, the meaningless kind they would forget hours later, where the name appeared.

“Oh, the one they say’s the Headless Rider’s boyfriend?”

“Yeah, that guy in black head to toe. The whole fake kidnapping thing recently? Apparently he was involved.”

“Involved... how?”

“I dunno. There’s this rumour that he beat a bunch of bōsōzoku and yakuza by himself or something...”

“Bōsōzoku in the fake kidnapping case? The hell? I thought the Headless Rider fans staged that entire thing?”

Amidst the flow of conversation between the boys and girls, one person tilted their head.

“That’s not what I heard...”

“What did you hear?”

“The Snake Hands I heard of was an Ikebukuro freelancer.”

“A freelancer? What’s with that?”

The word was hard to link with their image of the Headless Rider, and the boys laughed.

“Er, I mean, it was an ad from a news site. Said you could hire Snake Hands to

help with stuff around Ikebukuro.”

“Like house cleaning?”

“No, not housekeeping... What was it? Like, to act as a go-between to settle disagreements, or a bodyguard if you’re in danger, that kind of thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Isn’t that kinda scary? Like, this is exactly how normal people like us get tangled in shady things.”

The girl scratched her cheek, and the boy who had first spoken replied,

“Ah, it’s just a rumour. There’s no way anyone would hire such a suspicious person online, right?”

“They’re targeting the gullible type, probably.”

“Heh.”

“Anyway, have you bought Hijiribe Ruri’s new song?”

“Oh yeah, it’s good.” “———” “——”

And so, their conversation strayed aimlessly into other topics.

The students finished their meal without ado, and left after.

But Mizuchi Yahiro, who sat in the next table, was left with the name Snake Hands repeating over and over in his mind.

“...”

“What’s wrong, Yahiro-kun?”

At the voice of the girl sitting across from him—Tatsugami Himeka Having seen this, the green-haired boy beside him—Kotonami Kuon—teased,

“What’s wrong? Are you nervous? No guts to sit with girls?”

“Maybe? Am I nervous?”

Yahiro tilted his head. Kuon sighed.

“How could you answer that seriously? Look, Himeka-chan’s fine because she’s used to you being a block of wood, but now Akane-chan doesn’t know

what to say.”

Kuon was looking at Awakusu Akane, the girl in the middle school uniform sitting with them.

“Ah, I’m fine. Sorry.”

Akane bowed her head quickly. Yahiro bowed his head as well, apologising.

“Sorry, it seems I’m a bit weird, according to Kuon-kun.”

“No, there’s nothing wrong, I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.”

Unable to stand seeing Yahiro and Akane bowing back and forth like this, Kuon cut in.

“How long are you planning to go on?!”

“Ah, sorry.”

“I, I’m so sorry...”

“Stop! I’m putting an end to this right now! No more apologising!”

Perhaps she felt there would be no end to this conversation; Himeka spoke up, changing the topic.

“It’s a good thing your senior returned to school safely, right, Akane?”

“Of course!”

Akane nodded fiercely.

A fortnight ago her senior had gone missing, supposedly kidnapped by the Headless Rider; but now they knew the kidnapping was a ruse, and she had returned unharmed.

Although the incident made a flurry on TV and online for a day or two, since there were no deaths and it was revealed as a coordinated series of runaways, it was simply reported as a bizarre incident that turned out as a false alarm, and public attention quickly moved on to the serial assault case going on in the city.

“Everything sure went back to normal quickly.”

“Our teacher was very mad, and all of us had our own words for her... But it

seems everyone else just thinks she played truant for a week..."

"Ahh, indeed. Fake kidnapping or whatever, to middle schoolers it's just a chance to play hooky... But for all that mess, it got overshadowed by the serial assaults almost right after."

Replying to Kuon, Yahiro said,

"That's a good thing. It's best if it doesn't get blown up too much."

"Ah... I'm not saying I wanted it to, okay? Yeah?"

The green-haired boy clarified hastily, probably mindful since the sister of the perpetrators, Himeka, was sitting right in front of him.

The senior Akane spoke of was her younger sister, and furthermore, her older sister had been the mastermind of the whole thing.

"And it's good your older sister was discharged without problems, Himeka-chan."

"Yeah... Apparently she could go back to her job, too."

"Oh."

"Are you serious?"

Yahiro's reply was relieved, Kuon's startled. Himeka explained,

"I was told the magazine she works for published a special issue for the incident. They said it would be all right so long as she put in her thrilling firsthand account."

"Then wouldn't people think the magazine set the whole thing up?"

"Her boss doesn't seem to mind..."

"That's pretty amazing."

Kuon answered disbelievingly, prodding at the ice in his cream soda with his straw, while beside him Yahiro smiled somewhat happily.

"But thank goodness. At least your sisters can go back to their lives as usual."

"Well, I guess."

As the names of her sisters had not been published, neither were getting

bullied for it.

Relieved at this, Yahiro continued,

“Yeah, and you look better than before, Himeka-chan.”

“...You can tell?”

“Am I wrong?”

“...No.”

Faced with this conversation between fellow robots, Kuon gestured wildly and said,

“Oi, what’s up with you two?! I’ll even repeat that! What’s up with you two!”

“Is something wrong, Kotonami-kun?”

“Huh? Did I do something wrong?”

Himeka hardly twitched an eyebrow, and Yahiro only tilted his head innocuously; Kuon raked his hair.

“Argh! Are you two trying to be robots?! Act your age and have some sexual tension at least!”

“Kotonami-kun, what are you saying in front of a middle school girl?”

Himeka said this coolly, and glanced at Akane.

The girl appeared unaffected, and was instead looking at Himeka and Yahiro curious about their conversation.

Kuon, now the odd one out, began to stir his cream soda noisily with his spoon, grumbling at Yahiro under his breath.

“Dammit, and you’ve switched from ‘Tatsugami-san’ to ‘Himeka-chan’, too. Are you after her? You’re trying to woo her, aren’t you? I know you like her, you like her don’t you!”

With these childish words Kuon sipped up the melted concoction of ice and soda through his straw.

In reply Yahiro said, frankly,

“If you’re asking if I like her or not, I’m going to have to say yes. She’s pretty,

and she's a good person, after all."

"..."

"..."

Kuon stared at Yahiro, face frozen, while Akane blushed faintly as she peeked at Himeka's face.

Said girl's face remained emotionless as she replied, coolly,

"It's not that I don't like you, but I can't say anything so definite at this point, and I don't think such things are so easily decided."

Yahiro nodded firmly at her answer.

"You're right. Sorry, I was being weird."

"I don't think you need to apologise, but all right."

At this exchange between the two, Akane's face reddened as she became increasingly confused, while Kuon wore a sour face, repeating his earlier words:

"Oi, what's up with you two?! I'll even repeat that! What's up with you two!"

Their conversation having reached full circle, Kuon, who had now finished his cream soda, changed the topic.

"But really, there's never a day of peace. I know I said it already, but these days everyone's talking about the serial assaults. Since there've been so many victims there are even some people saying the Slasher is back."

"Slasher...?"

"Ah, Yahiro, you don't know? There was a huge slasher case about two years ago."

"I've heard of it."

When he was researching Ikebukuro talk of Ripper Night had caught his eye.

Word was that despite suspicions the case was linked to colour gangs, namely Dollars or the Yellow Scarves, the perpetrator was never identified, and the incident had died down on its own.

"But the news says the criminal uses a hammer, right? So shouldn't it be a

different person?"

"I don't know. Maybe they had a change of taste. It's possible the Slasher got bored of seeing blood and had the urge to whack something with blunt force instead."

Himeka said these grisly things unbotheredly. Yahiro nodded in understanding.

Himeka finished her salt-grilled saba set meal, and looking at Yahiro, who was munching with his mouth full of pancake.

"Anyway, the Slugger is one thing, but we're already consorting with someone even more dangerous, aren't we?"

"Huh? Who? Headless Rider-san?"

Yahiro tilted his head, fork in hand.

After a brief silence, Akane startled as though realising something, and began,

"Do, do you mean me, I'm so sorry..."

Associating with her, the granddaughter of the Awakusu-kai's chief, could put them at risk of danger.

Akane, painfully aware of that risk, apologised thinking it could be none other than her, but—

"It's not you, Akane-chan; I'm sorry my words bothered you."

Himeka returned the apology, and boldly addressed this 'dangerous person':

"...It's you, Kotonami-kun."

"What?! Me?!"

Kuon answered with exaggerated surprise, but she cut to the point.

"...What is 'Snake Hands'?"

"!"

Yahiro reacted to her words.

His hand occupied with his pancake stilled, and he eyed Kuon, beside him, surreptitiously.

Kuon, meanwhile, whistled innocuously, and tilted his head up to the ceiling.

"I dunno. It's what the people next to us were talking about, right? Maybe it's the name of the Headless Rider's boyfriend or something, the one who appeared during the recent case?"

"Don't pretend."

Himeka, still expressionless, took out her smartphone, and thrust it at him with a certain page.

Yahiro craned his head to look at it too.

And written on the screen was:

'Conflict resolution for Ikebukuro.

Finding people, revenge on bullies, bodyguarding—anything you can think of!

Ikebukuro Communal Aid Group —Snake Hands'

There were only these words on the page, without any details on what the business entailed or the fee, or even any means of contact.

With all this missing information, most visitors would probably assume it was a prank.

"What's this...? It's just a weird page."

Kuon smiled as he tried to lie, but Himeka pushed on.

"That's **only** advertised on sites with Nozomi-san's style?"

"She's probably just fooling around."

"If you keep going on, you'll find a page that says, 'We have information on the Headless Rider'. I think this goes beyond 'fooling around', yes?"

After a short silence, Kuon gave up and sighed.

"You got me. It shouldn't be accessible just by clicking, though."

"I'm good at solving puzzles, treasure-hunting, things like that."

"Damn, since Nee-chan was nagging me already..."

After grumbling about his sister, Kuon's expression changed, as he continued,

"Ah, well. I was going to tell you two sometime, anyway."

“...”

“Tell us?”

In contrast to Himeka’s wariness, Yahiro was blankly curious as he asked this.

An evil smirk came upon Kuon’s face, and he replied to his classmates, whispering,

“Yeah, I’ll tell you. This is business, too.”

“Business?”

Yahiro seemed to have sensed something suspicious, and with wary eyes continued to listen.

And, still wearing that evil expression, Kuon’s smile sharpened.

“Yeah. We made a cool **club** to solve Ikebukuro’s problems for money.”

“The group’s name is ‘Snake Hands’... Your underground name, Yahiro.”

♂ ♀

Kawagoe Highway. Shinra’s apartment.

“Snake Hands Snake Hands... Snake... Hands...!”

The words echoed in the large room like the chant for a curse.

“Kuu~! Damn it! What’s with snakes having legs! More isn’t always better! It makes me want to ask if they’ve heard too much of a cure becomes poison! It’s exactly in situations like this where people say less is more! Exactly! This situation! Exactly!”

Shinra huffed like a child throwing a tantrum; at this sight Celty could only shrug with exasperation.

‘What’s wrong all of a sudden. Yahiro-kun again?

“Yes, Celty! You know me so well! Our hearts are connected after all! What’s Celty’s is Celty’s, and what’s mine is all Celty’s, too, but your heart alone belongs to me, Celty!”

Although angry just seconds prior, his mood quickly swung and he held Celty’s hand with a lovestruck expression.

Celty obliged him half-heartedly, looking at the notebook computer he had been using.

On the screen was a forum where rumours about Snake Hands were being discussed.

'I heard the Headless Rider's tagalong that everyone's been talking about recently is called Snake Hands.'

'And where did you hear that?'

'Well, that bike gang... people from Dragon Zombie.'

'You sure they didn't just make it up?'

'But there's nothing else to call him anyway. It's troublesome to say "the Headless Rider's lover" all the time.'

'Actually, is the Headless Rider a he or a she?'

'There's a rumour the Headless Rider's a she... Well, if that's true maybe that makes Snake Hands her boyfriend?'

"What slander! Your only boyfriend is me! The rumours aren't dying down, they're spreading! At this rate I'm going to have to go on the Headless Rider page on online wikis and write 'Celty is cohabiting with her boyfriend Kishitani Shinra. They live an exciting, erotic life every day,' in a corner..."

'Citation required!'

"Ow?!"

Shinra found himself hit by a squeaky toy hammer made from shadow.

Seeing her cohabitant rolling around on the floor pressing his head, Celty rushed over.

'Huh?! That must have been harder than I thought... Sorry, are you hurt?'

"I'm fine Celty. I can love even the pain you give me!"

Shinra recovered instantly, and picked up the springy toy hammer made from shadow.

"But I really do envy Yahiro-kun. He got clothes handmade by Celty."

'Is handmade... the right word?'

“Hey, Celty.”

‘I’m not making anything for you.’

Celty said curtly before he could even ask.

“Ehh?!”

‘If I do anything for you you’ll just ask for more and more.’

“Well... I can’t say you’re wrong.”

Shinra bowed his head in contrition, and Celty sighed.

‘That’s why, er, well... Wait for your next birthday.’

Celty typed somewhat bashfully. Shinra gaped for a full moment—

And in the next moment, cried ecstatically,

“Uwahhh! Thank you, Celty! Celty, thank you! I know that day will come...

That alone will become my reason to go on living!”

‘Don’t exaggerate.’

“My birthday’s 2nd of April, so that’s just 11 months to go! I’m so excited!”

As she saw Shinra key the event into the laptop’s calendar excitedly, Celty felt relieved that he had finally cheered up.

Just then, Celty’s phone that was on the desk began to ring—not the smartphone she normally used to communicate, but the flip phone she carried around for work.

“Oh, it’s a message, Celty... Huh?”

As Shinra saw the sender displayed on the phone’s screen, he shuddered.

[Snake Hands]

At the sight of these words, he cried out again,

“Ugh! Speak of the devil! And you even saved him as that nickname! If you like snakes with legs I can only mix genes with a centipede and moggugogo”

‘It’s not like that, don’t misunderstand.’

Gagging Shinra with shadow, Celty picked up her smartphone, and typed

skilfully with one hand,

‘This Snake Hands isn’t Yahiro-kun.’

“Huh?”

Pressing the button to check the message, Celty continued,

‘Like I said, I have a new side job.’

‘Its name is Snake Hands, Shinra.’



The next day. Ikebukuro. Karaoke box Pasela. Inside a private room.

“Ah, so you’re Yahiro-kun!”

“Oh? What a cute boy.”

It was the first day of Golden Week in Ikebukuro.

When Yahiro, who had been invited out by Kuon, entered the room, he saw an unfamiliar man and woman—

The man had narrow slit-eyes and looked to be of mixed blood, while the woman was black-haired and decked in black.

They appeared to be in their early twenties.

The pair sitting opposite Kuon saw Yahiro enter, and addressed him amiably.

“Hello, I’m Yumasaki Walker.”

“Karisawa Erika, nice to meet you.”

“Ah, hi... I’m Mizuchi Yahiro.”

Nodding, Yahiro sat beside Kuon, and asked,

“Um... people you know?”

“Not exactly, more like people Aoba-sempai knows, so we’ve spoken on the street a couple times before...”

“How’s Aobacchi doing?”

“Ah, yeah, same as always.”

“I see. He caught Dotachin’s attention recently so he’s laying low, right?”

Karisawa laughed. Yahiro tilted his head.

“Dotachin?”

“Oh, just an inside joke. So, what’s your relationship with Kuocchi… ah, Kuon-kun?”

“We’re friends.”

Yahiro said promptly. Karisawa questioned further,

“Best friends?”

“I’m not sure. He’s the first friend I’ve made in my life, so I don’t really know.”

He replied without embarrassment. Kuon smiled wryly, as though having long given up, and looked away.

“I see~, hm~, oh~...”

The eyes of the woman called Karisawa flicked between the two intensely.

“Your first friend ever, huh? That works. Onee-san loves that kind of scenario. It’s cute that Kuocchi’s embarrassed, too.”

“Scenario?”

Yahiro tilted his head further. Yumasaki, breaking out in cold sweat, said,

“Um, let’s just say you shouldn’t think too much about what she says.”

“Ah, sorry, sorry, Onee-san made the two of you 2D in her head for a moment, that’s all.”

“2D...?”

“No worries. Really.”^(y)

After continuing the conversation like this for awhile, the man who had introduced himself as Yumasaki got to the point.

“Well, actually. We used the contact details on the Snake Hands site. We were surprised Kuon-kun was a member, when we made contact.”

“Yeah, I was shocked to see your names in the email, too.”

Kuon shrugged.

Yahiro suspected this could be another scheme of Kuon's, but since his face had none of his particular kind of falseness, he decided to trust him.

"So, about the commission.. I've been able to handle everything up till now with just my connections, but theirs is a little tricky. We need help."

"Wouldn't it be better to ask Aoba-sempai instead of me? You're always together anyway."

"No, it's not a job anyone can handle. It's going to take someone special."

Kuon paused, and looking Yahiro in the eye, he stated frankly,

"...A very strong fighter, specifically."

"..."

A brief silence.

"Oh, ...mogogogo."

"Karisawa-san, down. Down down down."

Karisawa, watching the two stare at one another, was about to comment, only to have her mouth covered by Yumasaki's hand.

Silence enveloped the room.

After looking at Kuon expressionlessly for a while, Yahiro sighed, and replied,
"Sorry, Kuon-kun. I'm not very willing to do **that kind of job...**"

His face was without any dislike or anger, only apology.

Yahiro bowed his head in apology, but Kuon quickly waved his hands in denial.

"Ah, wait, wait! You got it wrong! I'm not asking you to kill anyone or beat people up or anything like that!"

"You're not?"

Yahiro tilted his head, to which Yumasaki nodded.

"Yep. Do we look like the kind of bad guys to hire high schoolers to do that?"

"...You don't."

"Yeah?"

Yumasaki spread his arms. After looking at him, Yahiro bowed his head to Kuon.

“I see. Sorry, Kuon-kun. I misunderstood.”

“...No, if you apologise, it’ll be even more awkward...”

“?”

“We’re not asking you to attack innocent people, but... depending on the situation, you might be the one attacked, I guess...”

Kuon mumbled. Karisawa said clearly in his stead,

“The Slugger.”

“Huh?”

“We’re looking for the Slugger everyone’s talking about lately. We want to find the criminal before the police, but we don’t have enough people, unfortunately. That was when we saw the advert on an Ikebukuro news site? IkeNEW? After working through some stuff we got to the contact address.”

“We didn’t expect it to be someone we knew, though.”

Karisawa acknowledged Yumasaki’s addition with a nod, and looked at Yahiro.

“But you see, we’re up against the Slugger here... Whatever Kuocchi says, I didn’t think we can put children in danger like this, you know? But Kuocchi was very confident went he said you would be okay...”

“Then Kuocchi told us. You know the viral video recently, with the boy fighting Shizu-Shizu? He said that was you, Yahiro-kun.”

“...”

“If it’s true, then you might be even safer than a helpless adult, I thought. But still, we weren’t very willing to get a kid involved, and Dotachin would be mad... But then Kuocchi brought out his trump card.”

“Trump card?”

Yumasaki smiled and nodded at Yahiro’s question.

“Since he said you have Celty-san on your side, we can relax.”

“Celty-san?”

Yahiro looked at Kuon with surprise.

“Well that’s how it is,” Kuon smiled wryly, averting his eyes evasively.

“Um... Do the both of you know Celty-san too?”

“We go to Celcchi’s house for fun now and then~”

“You even visit her house... You might as well be best friends!”

“Your best friend bar’s that low?!”

Karisawa, while surprised, smiled mysteriously with an air of thoughtfulness.

Yumasaki sighed at her antics, and continued,

“Eh, we could’ve asked Celty-san from the start, but it’s a dangerous job after all.”

“And it’s not as easy to ask for as just taking a video*... Plus we suspect Celcchi would do it for free if we asked... That would make us feel bad, so we decided it would be best to do it as a job request.”

(*Nicococo!! reference.)

“Yeah, so, we don’t need you to fight the Slugger; we just want your help gathering information from rumours and such, to help Celty-san find the Slugger. We’re not intimate with the social circles of high schoolers, after all.”^(M)

“I see.”

Yahiro nodded in acceptance, and Kuon took it as his chance, continuing,

“You see, it’s similar to what we did for the kidnapping case. It’s just that if we catch the eye of the Slugger there’s a risk of being attacked. You’re a strong fighter, so if it’s you we don’t have to worry.”

“I’m not really a strong fighter...”

“Don’t be humble! I don’t know what you’re thinking, but the moment you fought on par with Shizuo the public consensus is you’re strong! Give up on the modesty, ‘kay? More than that, you wouldn’t want that Slugger on the loose, right? We never know, you or Himeka-chan might be next!”

“That’s true.”

Yahiro nodded immediately, but Kuon felt bothered rather than relieved.

“Wait... I got carried away back there, but do you really understand?”

“Yeah. I made up my mind during the last incident. When it comes down to it, the only gift I have is with violence. So at least, I want to make sure I don’t apply it in the wrong place.”

Yahiro declared this unshyly, his eyes serious.

“What I’m sure of right now is that protecting friends like you and Himeka-chan is the right thing to do. So I can accept helping to catch the Slugger.”

“Oi oi, we could be attracting trouble instead, you know? What if in the end Himeka-chan or I get targeted because we’re getting involved?”

Kuon said, intending to criticise Yahiro’s thoughtlessness.

He wore a self-satisfied expression, but Yahiro returned with a vicious counter.

“Even if I said that and backed out right now, you’d still continue without telling me, right?”

“...”

“If we’re going to make an enemy of the Slugger anyway, rather than getting ambushed without knowing a thing, facing it head-on... **is less scary.**”

With this bizarre logic, Yahiro turned away from Kuon, who had gone silent, and back to Yumasaki and Karisawa.

“So if you’ll have me, please let me help.”

Yahiro said calmly, bowing his head. Karisawa replied,

“No need to be formal. We’ll be paying you, anyway, plus we’re business partners; equals. Eh, you can hear those details from Kuon-kun. Anyway, what we’re paying for is information, so if you feel like there’s any danger at all you have to pull back, okay? No matter how strong you are, you should leave the dangerous stuff to adults. That’s the one thing you shouldn’t be stubborn about, got it?”

“Thank you very much.”

Yahiro bowed his head again, but suddenly a question occurred to him, and he asked,

“But why are we handing the culprit to you and not the police?”

Had a relative or friend of theirs been attacked?

Yahiro asked his question expecting a reason like this—

But instead of an answer, Yumasaki took out a stack of books from his bag, and began arranging the books on the table.

“?”

The books appeared to be manga volumes.

The title was familiar to Yahiro.

The manga was titled ‘Owl of the Peeping Dead’. The anime and live action adaptions of the series had earned the title popularity.

“The anime’s more popular, but still. Renting all of the DVDs isn’t feasible, so let’s use the manga as a starter—”

Yumasaki smiled cheerily, and slid the books out to Kuon and Yahiro.

“If you want the full story... You’re going to have to read all of this!”

“This?”

Kuon was confused as well, wondering if there was still more to the story he had not yet heard of.

“Wait, I know the Slugger cosplays a character from this, but...”

“Someone who commits crimes isn’t a cosplayer! They’re insulting the series!”

Yumasaki’s tone suddenly grew agitated. He picked up a microphone from the table, and announced to the room,

“OPD did nothing wrong! Nothing!”

10 minutes later.

“But halfway through the series they discover something terrible... A zombie that had lost sentience and regained it afterwards appeared. The protagonist ‘The Owl’ received a major

shock, realising that there might be a way to save the zombies he had killed thinking they could no longer return to who they were. That it might have been as the zombie protection association said, that they were only sick and could be cured..."

"Um, sorry, Yumasaki-san, I'm going to read the comic, I'm going to, so..."

"Aaaahhh! I'm so sorry! To reveal spoilers in front of a to-be reader...! I've failed as an otaku! I'll live in regret!"

Yumasaki was becoming genuinely depressed after being stopped by Kuon, but Yahiro interrupted,

"It's all right, I know the story."

"Huh? Yahiro-kun, you like anime or manga?"

"No, I saw the live action movie."

"Oh, the live action! That was good too! The project started with a fake zombie information website and progressed alongside the anime and manga before being released as a live action! But some people say plans for the film were already in place before the anime, so the live action might have been the original plan."

At this, Karisawa's eyes began to shine as well, as she added,

"Yeah, I was wondering if the live action would be alright, but it turned out to be so good~"

"Yeah, there wasn't much CG because of the low budget, but Zakuroya Tenjin-san's zombie makeup more than made up for it."

(*Zakuroya Tenjin: Hijiribe Ruri's cosmetics mentor.)

"Whoa, you know Zakuroya-san! Yahiro-kun, you actually know quite a lot, huh?"

The conversation grew livelier, finally beginning to match their karaoke setting, and Kuon, who had been left behind, asked Yahiro with wide eyes,

"O, oi, you know OPD?"

"Not the manga... I bought the DVD for the movie and watched it at home."

"Oh, so you're into movies."

“Sure I am.”

Yahiro replied as if it were obvious, and reminisced,

“I didn’t have any friends, so the only hobby I could have was watching movies on my own at home.”

“Oi don’t say that, I feel lonely just hearing it.”

“You do?”

“If a self-proclaimed loner said something so mood-ruining for attention, like, ‘hey, aren’t I pitiful,’ I could just nod along and ignore it. But you’re saying it so stoically. How do I react?! If I outright say you’re a poor thing, I’ll just feel bad!”

Yahiro’s eyes widened at Kuon’s agitated commentary.

“Was I pitiful?”

Yahiro looked around quizzically. Karisawa bent forward and ruffled his hair.

“It’s OK it’s OK, maybe you’re a poor thing but you’re very very cute.”

“?!”

At the unexpected touch, Yahiro shivered like a cat that had had its tail pulled.

In the middle of this odd mood, Yumasaki continued passionately,

“Anyway! Anyway! I can’t forgive the culprit! I have old friends from dōjin circles in WWW who are really bothered by this case!”

“I see.”

If his friends were being affected, then this Yumasaki person’s anger was well-justified.

Yahiro accepted Yumasaki’s motives, but even so, he voiced one doubt.

“But... Say Celty-san catches the culprit, what then?”

The question was perfectly natural; Yumasaki and Karisawa looked at one another, and replied, smiling pleasantly,

“We just want to talk to the criminal.”

“Yeah, like gentlemen.”

"We want to ask why they would do something to tarnish the image of anime fans like this... That's all, nothing more."

"Yep, we just wanna ask. Thoroughly and physically."

Yahiro, cowardly as he was, sensed something terrifying lurking behind their smiles—and chose, silently, not to probe further.



One hour later. Karaoke box. corridor.

Afterwards they wrapped up with the talking, and under the guise of a 'bonding session' Karisawa and Yumasaki had an anisong fest.

(*Anisong: anime song)

Most of the songs were unfamiliar to Yahiro, but he was able to select theme songs from movies he liked, and enjoyed his first karaoke experience wholeheartedly.

Yahiro's heart beat excitedly at singing songs he liked in front of others for the first time—

But when he left the room to go to the restroom, he wound up having a confrontation with Kuon, who had been on the phone in the corridor.

"...Yeah, I'll call you again later, Nee-chan."

Kuon ended the call, and shrugged at Yahiro.

Then, with a fearless smile, he said mockingly,

"Are you angry?"

"At what?"

"At what... At me."

"?"

Yahiro tilted his head with honest confusion.

Had he done something to anger Kuon?

Maybe it was something unacceptable in Tokyo. He began to think hard so he wouldn't repeat it.

Seeing this, Kuon bit at him,

"There were so many points you should have been angry. Why don't you get it?"

"There were?"

"...You realise I'm using you?"

Kuon asked this so bluntly he tutted at himself, and began to rail at Yahiro.

"I exposed that you were the one who fought Heiwajima Shizuo, then I used your strength as an excuse to involve you in dangerous business, and tried to use you as a selling point! Do you really get it? And my sister told you already, right? I've been using you from the start!"

"Yeah."

"Is that all you have to say..."

"But does that really mean I should be angry?"

Silence.

Kuon found himself speechless, and they were left with the muted sound of music echoing through the soundproofed walls of the hallway.

And then, frowning, Kuon said slowly,

...When do you get angry?"

Faced with Yahiro's reply, Kuon found himself unable to muster up even anger, and he asked the question with a resigned expression.

After some thought, Yahiro replied, his expression darkening as he did so,

"Mmm... Like that time the guy who hit me with a dump truck came back for revenge and tried to set my house on fire... Or that time I saw people attack my parents instead of me... When it comes to that kind of thing, I do get angry."

"...Hey, like I said, if you bring up examples that are so heavy I really won't be able to answer, so please."

Kuon sighed deeply, and said to Yahiro,

"Hey... Haven't you thought that I might do something like those people? Haven't you imagined that I might use your family or Himeka to force you into

bad situations?"

"That's a difficult question."

"That's why you need to be angry at an earlier checkpoint! Draw the line between right and wrong, won't you? You can tell I'm the bad guy with one look, right?"

Kuon spoke as if he was trying to convince Yahiro he was a villain. Yahiro answered, straightforwardly,

"This is what I think, Kuon-kun. I don't think right and wrong are so simply defined. At any rate, I don't have a good understanding of such things."

"..."

"If it's clear-cut, like a serial killing random people, or the serial assaults going on now, I can understand it. But I don't have the confidence to distinguish less simple things, like whether you and Himeka-chan are good people. All I know is that the things I've done up till now are no better than the Slugger. So I don't think I'm capable of deciding who is good or bad, and I don't have that right."

Saying this sadly, he clenched his fists, and told his friend,

"That's why, if you think you're being a bad person, and you want me to punch you in the face so you can stop..."

There he stopped for a moment.

Yahiro reflected on himself, and taking those thoughts into account, finished,

"I won't be able to notice, so I want you to tell me outright. I might not be able to judge myself, but in exchange, I'll always be ready to hit you."

Yahiro's words were honest to the point of foolishness.

"You're ridiculous."

"Sorry."

"How do you trust people so easily? Even being aware of all that?"

Grinding his teeth, Kuon said angrily,

"I hate this part of you."

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to fix it.”

“Don’t apologise so easily. It’s not like you’re the only one in the wrong.”

Kuon tsked, and began to walk away, signalling the end of the conversation.

As he passed Yahiro, Yahiro smiled softly, and said,

“Yeah... Thanks for worrying about me.”

“...!”

His expression stiffened, but by the time he turned Yahiro had already walked away, and Kuon only caught sight of his back as he rounded the corner towards the restroom.

Kuon rested his hand against the wall of the corridor, clicking his tongue sharply, and mumbled to himself,

“Shit, Yahiro’s really crazy...”

And, irritatedly remembering the face of the man he aimed to be, with a bitter expression, he said,

“If only he were a villain like Orihara Izaya, I could just squeeze him dry...”

♂♀

Night time. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

“Thanks for today, Horada-san!”

“Bye~.”

After his juniors bade their farewells, the man was left to walk home alone.

His name was Horada.

He was a former officer of Blue Square, and for having hijacked the Yellow Scarves once, he was the man known—self-proclaimed—as luck’s favourite child.

At the time he had only ridden the waves when it was convenient, but it seemed that his achievement had become a rather known story, and so he was relatively famous in the realm of colour gangs.

However, right now colour gangs themselves had faded from Ikebukuro.

Some had returned to their roots as bōsōzoku, while others had formed new gangs and dispersed into the shadows.

Having been left behind during his jail time, Horada now continued to plot his next era.

He had juniors in awe of him, but just the same, there were enemies that hated him.

To stand his ground in Ikebukuro under these circumstances, having decisive power was necessary.

With this in mind, Horada remembered one of the ‘power’s within his grasp.

—Shit, there hasn’t been a good time to catch that Mizuchi Yahiro since ten.

—I have to tell him it was me who found the kidnappers’ base as soon as possible, so I can collect on that debt...

In the recent fake kidnappings, it was Horada who had tracked where Tatsugami Himeka had been taken by her abductors, though it was by complete coincidence.

It seemed that after he told his Blue Square juniors the news had gotten to Mizuchi Yahiro himself, and thus the situation had been resolved without issue.

This meant the boy now owed him a debt, but if he pushed the matter too much or too clumsily, the boy might obey him only once and there would be no chance to create a long-term alliance.

—Rather than forcing him to return the favour, I need to imprint on him that I’m his benefactor...

—But I’ll be in trouble if word spreads around... I don’t know just what happened, but I heard Awakusu-kai and Dragon Zombie and whatnot were all there. If things go badly I could wind up targeted...

After a full-body shudder, he looked towards the vending machine at the end of the road.

—Anyway I’m thirsty.

—Maybe I should get a coffee.

Standing in front of the vending machine, Horada selected the no-sugar milk coffee.

With a clank, the canned coffee dropped into the dispenser.

The vending machine, no different from usual.

Horada reached for it, no different from usual—

When he noticed one abnormality.

“...What?”

Sensing a shadow moving at the edge of his vision, he turned his head to the left.

Where stood a figure in black mascot pajamas.

“Uwoh?!”

He yelped seeing the unfamiliar thing standing in the shadow of the vending machine, and realising it was just a mascot suit, tsked and glared.

“What the hell? What’s with that costume! I’ll kill you!”

With this cheap threat, Horada reached out to grab the other person’s collar—but he stopped seeing the figure raise something in their hand.

It was a slim object bound in white cloth.

But he quickly realised what it was.

From the shape alone it was obvious it was a metal hammer beneath those bandages.

At the same time Horada noticed this, the bandaged hammer swung down towards him.

“Uwooaahh?!”

He shrieked and rolled to the side, escaping the hammer by a hairsbreadth.

“Wha... B, bastard! You don’t know who I am?! What gang are you?! Huh?!”

Horada, who had zilch interest in news reports and did not even glance at newspapers, did not realise this was the Slugger.

“And dressing like a weirdo...”

But even so, he could comprehend that the person in front of him was an enemy.

He got to his feet immediately, but the person in the black mascot suit swung the hammer again, undaunted.

“Don’t look down on me!”

Horada flung the canned coffee he had just bought at his assailant.

“!”

Mascot Suit blocked the can aimed at their abdomen with both arms.

But Horada used the second bought to body slam them.

Before Mascot Suit could raise the hammer again, he began to punch the hooded face without abandon.

The mascot suit stranger collapsed and lay prone in front of the vending machine.

“Bastard... You think a weakling like you can beat the great Horada?! Huh?!”

Yelling that, he moved closer so as to deliver the final blow, about to kick Mascot Suit’s face, but—

“Gah?!”

An impact rocked him, and the upper half of his vision went dark.

When he turned around dizzily, he saw another figure standing there, dressed in the same mascot pajamas—

“Two on orrne... Don’t think I’m scarrred... Bas... tards...”

Unable to enunciate clearly, the last thing Horada saw before he passed out—

Was the bandage-wrapped hammer coming down upon him without mercy.

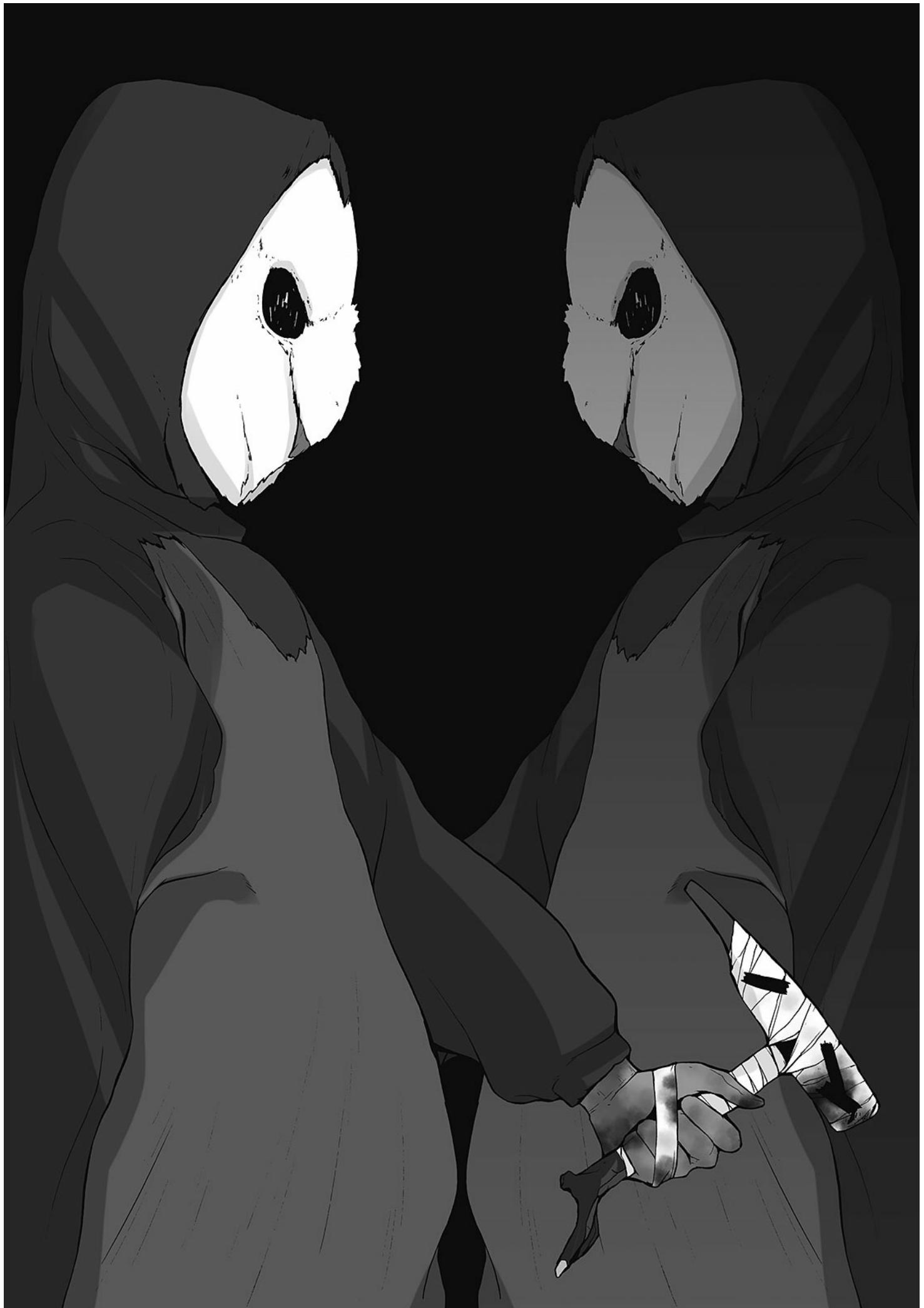
And his own blood staining those white bandages.

♂♀

The next morning.

‘Next on the news. The current serial assault case has a new victim.’

'The casualty is a 22-year-old unemployed man in Tokyo, Horada—'



Interlude: Rumours on the Internet 1

Ikebukuro Information Site, IkeNEW! Version I・KEBU・KUR・O

Latest Article, *A gang war breaks out—Ex-Colour Gang Topdog Falls Victim to the Slugger—Revival of the Yellow Scarves?*

‘Where has the Headless Rider Gone?’—(Excerpt from Tokyo Warrior Digital Edition)

‘In the early hours of the morning today, an anonymous call from the public that a man was being assaulted on the street drew the police to said scene, where they discovered a man on the ground with a head injury.

Perhaps fearful of getting involved, the caller was no longer on the scene, and the man was transported to the hospital, although it was announced later he was in no life-threatening danger.

According to the caller, the attacker was wearing something black that looked like a mascot suit, and had attacked with a white rod-like object. As such, the police are investigating this case with the possibility that the culprit is the same one behind a serial assault case.

There is also news that the man attacked was an officer in a colour gang that used to exist in Ikebukuro. One of our sources offered the following opinion: ‘This could be a war between colour gangs or bōsōzoku disguised as random assault.’ As there could be an outbreak of gangfights, various groups are keeping up their guard.’

—(Click here for the full article)

Reference material—Tsukumoya Shinichi-shi’s commentary, extracted from another news site

‘Whether related to the Slugger or not, it is true that the return of Dragon Zombie’s leader has affected the power play between gangs.

Meanwhile, Snake Hands, a rumoured new power in Ikebukuro—though I do not know if this is the name of an organisation or a person’s nickname—has certainly caught attention.

I would like to continue observing if he, or she, or they, will become the eye of a new storm in Ikebukuro.

As the Slugger's victim this time is a man who was noted widely back in the era of the Dollars, it is possible that old coals may be rekindled with this incident. It may be worth keeping an eye on this.'

IkeNEW! Administrator's Comment

"According to online rumours, it's H-san who only recently came out from prison-moja.

There's a rumour that he was the Yellow Scarves leader for a moment-moja.

A scary ex-convict...

Have vengeful victims teamed up against him now he is free of his punishment? Or, though he seems strong from his record, could the Slugger have done him in that easily?

If it's a gang fight, who did it?

Dragon Zombie?

Jyan Jyaka Jyan?

Dollars?

Yellow Scarves?

Blue Square?

Saitama's Toramaru?

Or has a new, yet unseen power emerged in Ikebukuro?

Creepy-moja. Scary-moja.

The Slugger is scary, but gangsters teaming up into groups is scary too-moja.

Touch wood-moja."

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*



Excerpts of typical tweets from microblogging site *Twittia*.

The way Tsukumoya-san talks on his website is way too different from how he sounds in his books.

- He's proper when it comes to formal settings, but he gets wild when he's writing frank articles.
 - I wonder which is the real him.
 - It's like there's more than one person.
 - Like there's multiple people.

So in the end was that the Slugger? Or just a gang fight?

- There were witnesses so it must have been the Slugger. Unless it was a cosplaying gang?
 - But the witnesses were anonymous, right? Maybe the rival gang reported it themselves.
 - If you assault someone and call the police yourself, it'll come off exactly like Slugger, won't it?
 - Then wouldn't the police think the Slugger's behind it?
 - Then the motorcycle gangs would be beyond suspicion, right?
 - Uhyo~, aren't I smart?
 - Uh, anyone could have thought of that, why are you so smug...
 - Just shut up?
 - Ooh, you're so smart (deadpan)
 - If you look down on me I'll block you, yeah? I'll really do it, okay?
 - I think that is a possibility. It's even possible that all of the attacks up till now have been the doing of bōsōzoku.
 - I know, right~? But maybe the previous ones weren't?
 - Is there a difference?
 - Motorcycle gangs have no reason to attack couples or old men taking walks, right?

Horada was the victim?

- Apparently.
 - Ha, serves him right.
 - Isn't that a bit harsh?
 - I'm not surprised someone like him got it.
 - Yeah, he just clung to Izumii-san like a limpet and acted like a fucking hotshot.
 - I heard he had a gun at one point.
 - Shit, he's just trouble. They should put him to death.

The Headless Rider's behind it.

- Is everything the Headless Rider's fault?
 - The recent fake kidnapping case was indirectly caused by the Headless Rider, too...
 - It's not good to pin everything on the Headless Rider.
 - Because the Headless Rider's a very cute person.
 - The fake kidnap victims put her on a pedestal without consulting her, they were more like antis than worshippers.
 - The Headless Rider was the one who resolved the fake kidnapping case, too.
 - What a desperate guy.
 - I checked his profile it says 'Occupation: underground doctor' lmao
 - Underground pfft doctor pfffft

Speaking of which, I wonder what Snake Hands is exactly.

- There's been no further news, hm.
 - Wasn't Snake Hands the Headless Rider's girlfriend?
 - Boyfriend, wasn't it?
 - Is the Headless Rider a woman?
 - There are rumours.
 - She must be a woman. I saw her get off the motorcycle once, those hips are a woman's alright.
 - She has some chest if you look from the side, that's definitely female.
 - So, unless she's gay Snake Hands is her boyfriend?
 - No.
 - Snake Hands is not her boyfriend.
 - Their relationship is what's unnecessary. (**'Unnecessary' = dasoku = snake's legs)
 - Underground doctor (rofl) shut up. Or I won't give you your license~.

※ The rest of the conversation was kept private.

Oi, Shinra. I'll write this here since I'm out. Tone down a little.

You're harassing people.

You're usually so calm, why does Yahiro-kun agitate you so much?

- Sorry, Celty. I was just so frustrated.

- Yahiro-kun and other strong people can fight alongside you, but I don't have that ability.
- I'm envious you can watch each other's backs!
 - ...Uh, we're not that close, okay?
 - Seriously. You were never jealous when I talked to Shizuo or Izaya.
 - Yeah... I know it's weird.
 - It's just something I've been thinking since what happened the year before.
 - When I got kidnapped by another woman you went so far to chase me.
 - So now you're being wooed by another man... I feel like I have to be jealous with all my might...
 - Mm, I'm glad you feel that way, but your target's completely wrong, yeah?
 - Yahiro-kun isn't courting me, okay?
 - Anyway, I got it. We'll talk about it when I get home.

And Shinra. You should delete 'Occupation: underground doctor' from your profile.

- It's fine, no one will believe it. I won't get reported.
 - That's not the problem...
 - To be honest, it looks kinda embarrassing...



清正

「清く正しく生きて行こう」

Chapter 2

Let's Live Purely and Righteously

Something is wrong.

How did it turn out this way?

I got rid of the trash.

I did a good thing.

So why is Dark Owl still the bad guy?

Why does that trash get to play the victim?

♂ ♀

Dusk. Raira General Hospital. Private ward.

Horada awoke feeling aches creaking all over his body.

It was a few days after he had been attacked by the Slugger and sent to the hospital.

There were hairline fractures in his cranium, but miraculously his brain was undamaged.

Instead, because he had been kicked around after losing consciousness, there were multiple cracks in his ribs, collarbone, and arm; he remembered the forecast of months of recovery.

“Ah, ow... Owww... Fuck. Are the painkillers even working?”

He was told that he would be giving his testimony as soon as he was clear-minded, but Horada had escaped it by claiming that he still felt woozy.

The reason was simple: he had the feeling he would have no filter on what he said if he were to be questioned by the police before calming down, and wind up exposing things he should not.

Perhaps because they knew the Slugger did not focus on specific targets, the police had not assigned any guards. Even if they had, Horada would have

rejected by saying it was distracting.

—But, what should I tell the cops?

—I can say there were two people attacking me, but if I let slip that I hit back I might get in trouble myself.

—I need to find a way to testify such that it can only be interpreted as rightful self-defence...

—Actually, getting beaten by a Slugger's kinda lame... Should I just say there were ten-plus of them...?

Without considering that there could be other witnesses, or that a false testimony could hinder the investigation, Horada simply thought of protecting himself.

“Seriously, that bastard's dead if I see him again... Owowow.”

As he complained to himself, the bones throughout his body creaked as though in reply.

Right after he decided to lay still like a good patient and think about his future plans—

He caught something move in the corner of his vision.

“W, who's there?”

Was it a nurse?

With that expectation, Horada craned his aching neck.

What met his eyes was a man on the guest stool, made distinct by the pair of sunglasses and the burn scar on his face.

“Huh.”

The man grinned, and closing the adult magazine in his hands, he got to his feet.

“They said you were only half-conscious, so I thought it might've been a wasted trip... But looks like you're quite energetic, hm?”

“...!”

Horada's entire body shivered in spite of his creaking bones, and, teeth chattering, he spoke the man's name.

"I... I-i-i... Izumii... -san."

Izumii Ran.

A few years ago the man had been the leader of Blue Square, a gang Horada used to be part of.

He had been incarcerated after certain events, but he had left prison the same time Horada went in, and was now rumoured to be a junior member of the Awakusu-kai.

"Poor thing. I heard the rumours... so I came to visit."

"O, o, oh! Thank you for coming!"

Horada replied with a subservient tone automatically.

Izumii had visited Horada in jail once previously—but to be honest, Horada had hoped never to see him again.

In the first place he was already the kind of man mad enough to use a hammer to break the leg of a girl he had just abducted, but after being set on fire by a gang member turning on him and going to jail for a time, it felt as if he had lost several more screws.

"B, but wow, Izumii-san, you've really slimmed down! I didn't recognise you at all!"

Horada, shocked by this turn of events, decided to test the waters first.

The bones in all his body ached with every word, but the pain was far outmatched by his fear of this man, and so he endured and pasted a servile smile on his face.

"Really? I have a shortcut if you wanna lose weight."

Shrugging, Izumii took something

It was miniature hammer, made of hard rubber.

"If I break your jaw, you won't even be able to eat, so you'll lose weight, right?"

“...!”

Izumii fiddled with the hammer, smacking it on his palm.

Horada's fear of Izumii and the trauma of seeing the weapon he had been assaulted with mere days ago churned together in his mind. If that hammer had been wrapped in white bandages, he might have started screaming there and then.

“T, that was a mean joke, Izumii-san.”

Horada continued to smile smarmily. A fixed smile made its way on Izumii's face as he changed the topic,

“Oh right, this is the hospital the woman whose legs I broke went to. Remember? The girlfriend of that Yellow Scarves brat Kida. The one you kidnapped.”

“Eh? O, oh, yeah.”

“This might even be the same ward. There could be some grudge cursing this room; I wouldn't be too surprised if you suddenly had both your legs broken for no reason.”

「.....」

Smack, smack.

The rhythmic slap against his hand synchronised with the beating of Horada's heart.

He did not know what the other man was planning, but for that same reason he was at a real risk of facing the business end of that hammer without warning.

Horada gulped, and Izumii said,

“And so.”

“Y, yeoah?!”

Horada answered raspily. Izumii bent his face close.

“Obviously I can't just let it be, right?”

“H, huh?”

“Y’know hammers are my specialty, right? My colleagues are whispering that it was me punishing you. Normally I wouldn’t give a fuck what they say, but it’d be bad Aozaki-san or Akabayashi-san from even higher up got to hear rumours like that, hm?”

Izumii gripped the hammer, and forced the end against Horada’s nose.

“Fugagaga”

Horada broke out in cold sweat as he whimpered in pain, but Izumii continued regardless,

“If I have people saying I need to wear a costume and stage an ambush just to keep you in line, it makes things inconvenient, yeah? Horada-kun.”

“Y, yeah!”

“Take your old lackeys and comb the city. Use everything at your disposal. Root up that fucking Slugger before the police and drag him in front of me. Got it?”

“...!”

It was a ridiculously impossible order, but he could not fight against the pressure of the man before him.

Horada wracked his drowsy brain for some way to execute the order.

—Before the police?!

—Wait, is it best if I don’t tell him there were two of them?

—And I need men...

—Men... Ah.

Suddenly the idea came to it, and Horada asked Izumii tentatively,

“Uh, um, is it okay if I use Blue Square?”

“Huh? Do what you like.”

Izumii said, face thoughtful at the idea he had not thought of before. Horada continued,

"B, but see, your brother's with them, what if he gets hurt...
bugofufugugugu?!"

The instant the word 'brother' left his lips, Izumii was squashing his nose under the hammer again.

"Why do I have to give a fuck about that shitty bastard Aoba? Huh? Do I have to count his calories one by one and check his fucking nutrition intake? Do I need to hand-make well-balanced meals for him? Huh?"

"Sh, shorry!"

Ran's anger was completely over the top, but Horada apologised tearily to escape his rage.

"Good. You're an ex-higher-up of the Blue Square. Aoba's a current member and your junior. That's all there is to it."

Izumii cricked his neck, and stated,

"I don't care if you break him. ...Use him and destroy him in the process if it suits you."

As though looking forward to his own brother's destruction.

♂ ♀

The next day. Somewhere in Ikebukuro. Bowling alley.

"So we're looking for the Slugger. Wanna help?"

When Kuronuma Aoba said this to him, Yahiro tilted his head and fell into thought with the bowling ball still in his hand.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing... I just thought it was a coincidence."

It was halfway through Golden Week when Aoba had asked Yahiro to meet up.

Reaching the bowling alley he had met Aoba himself, accompanied by a group of somewhat delinquent-looking others.

All of them were in casual clothes, and Yahiro as well wore the clothes he had bought in the city just recently.

They started off bowling, but in the middle of the third game Aoba, who was

playing in the same lane as Yahiro, approached him to talk.

According to him, one of their seniors, a man called Horada, had been attacked by the Slugger, and had ordered Aoba to find the criminal for revenge.

Said victim was still hospitalised, but his condition was not life-threatening.

Unaware that Yahiro so happened to have been tasked to look for the criminal by someone else already, Aoba explained their situation lightly.

“We’re not pals... You should be clear on that since the last incident, right?”

“Yes, I asked around about Blue Square.”

“Oh? How was it?”

“Your reputation is not very good.”

Aoba burst out laughing at his frank reply.

“Yahiro-kun, that’s too honest.”

“No, I’m just scared I’ll get exposed if I lie.”

Yahiro simply orated his truest intention, but Aoba seemed to have interpreted something different, for he laughed before continuing.

“Yeah, we have a bad rep. I might be the horrible senior with the bad reputation, but I’m still your senior; I need to save face, you know.”

With an expression hard to associate with his model student persona in school, Aoba continued,

“It’s good to have as many people searching as possible. I was thinking to get your help.”

“OK.”

“...That was fast. I thought it would be a straight no.”

“Why?”

Yahiro tilted his head, and in reply, Aoba brought up a person not with them today.

“I spoke to Kuon, too, but he said he’s busy with some new business. I thought you would be involved in that.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“You’re actually telling me?!”

Aoba had planned to trick it out of him, but being informed so bluntly left a sense of anticlimax that showed on his face.

“Aren’t you supposed to keep things like this secret from me?”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Aoba tilted his head in mimicry of Aoba, and answered jokingly.

He proceeded to try drawing out more information on Kuon, but—

“So, what kind of business is it?”

“Ah, that part’s secret.”

“...”

“Sorry, it’s not because it’s you, Aoba-sempai, but it seems the details have to be kept private. I think it’s best if you ask Kuon-kun directly, if you really need to know..”

A flat refusal.

There was no dislike whatsoever in his words.

To be more accurate, he usually regarded Aoba with some degree of wariness, but that was a unique trait of Yahiro’s timid personality; an almost delusional vigilance based on thoughts like, ‘How should I escape if suddenly everyone here gets hypnotised into attacking me with metal bats?’

It was as normal as normal was with Yahiro, and Aoba understood this as well.

As such, Aoba concluded Yahiro would not be telling him anything, and he returned to the main topic.

“Nevermind. I’ll try asking Kuon if I can get in the deal too.”

“OK, thank you.”

“So, the Slugger... Horada-sempai’s your benefactor, so you can’t not repay the debt.”

“My... benefactor?”

Yahiro said, uncomprehending. Aoba said,

“Yep. Remember the fake kidnapping case?”

“Yeah.”

“Back then, your friend, er... Tatsugami-san? It was Horada-sempai that found her, you know.”

“!”

Yahiro’s eyes widened.

At the time the detail had been insignificant in the chaos, but now it was brought up Aoba had indeed said that he knew their location ‘from a senior’.

If that person was Horada, then he truly was a benefactor.

“I see... In that case I do need to help.”

“Yep. That’s why, once you find the guy, we snatch him up for awhile before he gets to the police. Sound good?”

“...”

Kidnapping.

Yahiro mulled over the word.

“Ah, I don’t mean we’re going to beat him up or anything, yeah?”

“But it’s a crime from the moment you kidnap anyone, right?”

“I guess. If you put it that way, everything you did at the villa was criminal too, right? Or maybe excessive self-defence?”

During their conversation, Aoba’s turn to bowl arrived.

“Ah, it’s my turn.”

While Aoba went off to bowl, Yahiro thought.

—Mmm. What now?

—I think it’s best not to beat the criminal up.

—But taking an eye for an eye is what I’ve always done.

—I can't forbid them from doing it...

—In the first place, if I catch the criminal, do I go to Karisawa and Yumasaki, or Horada-sempai first?

—Karisawa-and Yumasaki-san said they only want to talk... So Karisawa-san, and once they're done talking Horada-san, and once it looks like they're going too far I stop them and send the criminal to the police?

—Ahh, but I still think it's best not to beat anyone up.

—But I don't have the right to stop them...

As he was engrossed in his thoughts Aoba seemed to have scored a spare, and his gang members from the lanes on either side cheered and heckled him.

Yahiro's turn came next, and relieving Aoba he took a ball and walked out.

Then, as he passed Aoba, he said.

“I still think you shouldn’t take revenge.”

“Oh? Why?”

Unable to answer immediately, Yahiro threw the ball first.

After throwing with a good amount of strength, without checking where it went, he turned back to Aoba, and spoke.

Surfacing in his mind was the scenery of his past.

His bloodstained hands, and the wretched state of his attackers still on the scene; a scenery he had witnessed over and over in his hometown.

“If you return every blow you get, after a while... it gets harsh, you know?”

At the same time, the monitor above the lane glowed as it announced a strike.

“Ah... strike?”

Having thrown the ball without much care, and he had assumed it would go to the gutter.

Yahiro, who had been waiting for the ball to come back fully expecting to go for his second try, widened his eyes; Aoba pat his junior’s shoulder, smiling.

"You don't have to tell me that. I know."

Aoba smiled faintly, and there was a peek of a face different from that Yahiro always saw.

"But you know, Yahiro-kun. ...For us, we feel most at home living in that harshness."

♂ ♀

Evening. Ikebukuro West Gate Park.

"And that's how it is. What do I do?"

It was late enough that the sun had sunk behind the buildings.

Sitting on a metal tube bench, Yahiro asked Himeka, who sat beside him, this question.

"From how you're actually discussing this with me, I don't think there's anything you *can't* do..."

Himeka told him this defeatedly, but even so her expression was largely the same.

Yahiro had decided to consult Himeka right after his meeting with Aoba.

It turned out she was just passing by Ikebukuro Station, so they decided to meet up at the park.

As Himeka was more or less a member of Snake Hands as well, Yahiro explained about his job finding the culprit without hesitation.

To his surprise, however, Himeka already knew.

'I told Kuon-kun I'd help if I could, and Nozomi-san called a few days later,' she had said; apparently Nozomi had filled her in about the case.

"...So you accepted the job too, Himeka-chan?"

"Well, something like that."

"But I think it's dangerous for you to get involved..."

Yahiro said somberly. Himeka replied calmly,

"I don't think you should say that, since you looked for the Headless Rider even when rumours said she was a kidnapper."

"That's true."

Yahiro accepted her point with a nod, and Himeka gave a small sigh.

"Well, I'm not intending to do anything dangerous. I just had the feeling Kuon-kun and Nozomi-san would get up to something if I didn't do anything, so..."

"Yeah, that's true."

Musing over how Himeka had been thinking the same thing as him, Yahiro asked once more,

"Anyway, naturally it's best that the assaults stop. But there are two groups who want to meet the criminal before the police. So, if by luck I suddenly come across the Slugger lying on the ground and get to catch them, who should I go to first?"

"This might be hard to answer, but can I ask one thing?"

"What is it?"

"Why would the Slugger be lying on the ground?"

At the question she replied with, Yahiro said,

"Maybe they tried to attack Heiwajima Shizuo, and he retaliated or something..."

"...That's certainly imaginable."

Still expressionless, Himeka bent forward, and stared straight at Yahiro's face.

"Mizuchi-kun. Even if the Slugger suddenly showed up, you can win the fight, right?"

"It's scary. I don't want to fight the Slugger."

"You're saying that after beating down bōsōzoku and yakuza, here..."

"I was really scared previously, too. But not doing anything back then was even scarier. That's all."

Unease tinted Yahiro's eyes as he continued,

"I've always been fighting people, so when it comes to interacting, or compromising, I'm completely out of my depth... I never know what's the right

thing to do.”

“Then make mistakes. It’s easier to remember that way.”

“It’s scary.”

“It’s always a little surreal, the way you say something is ‘scary’.”

Himeka commented, still expressionless; then she went back to the subject of the Slugger.

“...When you use your strength, you have a reason. So, why do you think the Slugger doing all of this?”

“If I were to say...”

Yahiro had not even considered examining the criminal’s motive.

His image of the Slugger was unanimous with that of serial killers in movies; the vague impression of ‘a stage prop that attacks people without reason’.

Nonetheless—though he did not want to think about it since it sounded like excuses—it was true that even he, who had been feared as a monster himself, had his own reasons for using violence.

He did not even want to imagine anyone with logic like ‘I killed because the sky is blue’ strolling around the city.

(*Etsusa Bridge reference?)

But because he was also afraid of discarding the possibility, Yahiro kept it at a corner of his mind while he continued to think about the criminal.

“The Slugger... Why. Why is that person hitting people? I’ve been hit from behind with hammers a couple of times, but... Right, those people always said they’d kill me, but what were they planning to do after that...?”

Perhaps Himeka was already used to it, for, despite that what he said was beyond disturbing, she paid no mind to it and began to brainstorm with him.

“What most people would think is that the criminal has some condition where they feel good when they hurt others, or has some delusion that they’ll die unless they hit others... Though it’s also possible that the victims aren’t completely random.”

“Not random?”

“In other words, the victims could have something in common. Even if it looks random to us, there could be a specific criteria only the criminal understands that they’re using to choose their victims. I think in that case, the motive becomes important.”

“Something in common, huh... I never thought of it.”

He had heard the bare bones of the case through the radio and such, but as far as he knew the victims were young and old and of different genders, and the first victims had been a couple.

Did the couple and Horada-sempai have anything in common?

Yahiro realised that, familiar with neither Horada nor the couple, he could not even answer that question, and he blew a small sigh.

“I just can’t seem to understand the Slugger’s state of mind. Himeka-chan, do you have any ideas?”

Yahiro asked, and Himeka thought for awhile.

“Hmmm... I heard this from a journalist my sister knows, but... Apparently the Slugger has attacked quite a number of delinquents.”

“Delinquents?”

“Yeah. Nearly half of the victims were bōsōzoku members, or that type. That’s why more and more people are thinking it’s linked to the Slasher case a few years ago.”

The Slasher.

Yahiro latched on to the term he had heard in the restaurant the day before.

“The Slasher... Do you know what happened, Himeka-chan?”

“I was in middle school back then, so I didn’t really stay out late or anything, but... In school, at least, everyone was alert. Especially since one of my seniors in high school had a classmate who was attacked...”

(*Probably Harima Mika again; classmate is Anri.)

“I see, and the culprit was never caught...”

Yahiro decided to research in this direction to find out if the cases were related. Himeka informed him additionally,

"There was this group called, Dollars...? That people suspected were harbouring the Slasher... But Kuronuma Aoba-sempai should be more clear on those things."



Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

Ajimura Shōya was a serial assaulter.

However, he had no awareness of it himself.

The man, currently 28 years of age, worked a part-time job in the day, and operated as a fan of *Owl of the Peeping Dead* by night.

Though put that way, it was not that he drew fannomics for it.

He was the administrator on a community of OPD fanatics.

By pressuring the private community in various ways, he agitated the gathering of fanatics in a united direction.

The man himself had the best intentions.

But occasionally his activities would go too far and cause trouble for others.

Repeatedly criticising rival films airing at the same time period on movie review sites so as to increase the popularity of OPD... such activities were everyday occurrences.

They would tell the production team, 'The current plot development will lower the quality of OPD,' and then send over 'the developments we thought of', attaching a note saying, 'you can use this for free'.

If the number of female characters increased they would send protests saying, 'Stop kissing up to those moe-otakus,' and when the number of male characters increased they would still send protests, saying, 'Stop kissing up to fujoshi'.

When they felt the casting of actors unsatisfactory for the live action film, they would harass the artiste company with thousands of anonymous letters saying, 'Remove these castings and change it like this,' and post criticisms all

over the web.

They would act like zombies and cause trouble in Ikebukuro claiming it was an offline meet-up and they were ‘having fun by becoming zombies in the sacred land of OPD’; and when normal fans tried to stop them they would harass those fans with accusations saying ‘you’re not becoming a zombie because you don’t love the series’.

This persisted over time, and the fansite notorious amongst OPD fans.

Ajimura was the administrator of the site, but he was unbothered by criticism.

He was certain that his site’s critics were either jealous of their influence, or haters pretending to be OPD fans.

To these fanatics, himself included, the priority was not OPD but themselves.

Killing the god for the religion.

The community around them said this in mockery of them, but Ajimura, who ran the website, was as though a personification of everything it represented.

- ‘OPD depicts my story.’
- ‘The Owl is my righteousness, and Dark Owl my evil.’
- ‘The world destroyed by zombies is the same as this situation that corners me. Filled with the stink of despair.’
- ‘Maybe the series was modelled after someone like me.’
- ‘No; maybe it was modelled after me.’

Convinced by these almost delusional thoughts, in his heart, he began to make OPD his own.

Perhaps, under the excuse of fan activities, he had been trying to control the world of OPD.

By controlling the world of the series, he had the misbelief that he could control his own world, the model it had been based off (or so he arbitrarily believed).

And—committing serial assault in a Dark Owl cosplay was part of these fan activities.

It was not him at first.

When he first saw the news, he had not yet noticed it was Dark Owl.

The rumour that the criminal was wearing a Dark Owl cosplay spread on the internet before the TV or newspapers.

When he discovered this, Ajimura was shocked.

Dark Owl was he himself.

That was the only way things could be.

That was why it was wrong.

The other one was an imposter.

—*'Do these criminal acts from a person who's lost sight of the line between fiction and reality?'*

Seeing these words dance across weekly magazines and the internet, Ajimura was indignant.

—No. Nonono.

OPD was not even fiction; it was reality.

It belonged to no one else. It was a reality by him and for him.

It would not do for a part of Dark Owl to be a cheap person who could not distinguish reality and delusion.

He could not forgive that person being seen as one with Dark Owl.

—'Crimes committed due to external influence'

Ajimura heard the commentator on the TV utter those words, and screamed.

—They're wrong, they're completely wrong.

OPD is my life.

I'm not cheap.

People influenced by me wouldn't do things like that.

The other Dark Owl was wrong.

It was not how Dark Owl should be.

A few hours after Ajimura, who had continued yelling in his room and been told by his neighbour to 'shut up'.

Burying his face in his futon, he thought, he thought, he thought.

At this rate Dark Owl would be misunderstood as no more than a reckless villain.

Owl of the Peeping Dead was being painted as a Bible of evil.

His life was being defiled.

Misinformation about himself was being circulated by the ignorant mass media.

So he thought, and he thought, and he reached one conclusion.

—Yes. I must show them the truth.

—I have to teach the world's scum about the real Dark Owl.

He did not know what to do.

But he knew that if he made it known to the world, the public image of Dark Owl should change.

Without realising, he was howling.

'Shut up,' his neighbour complained again.

But Ajimura ignored this, and simply, simply continued to yell.

"Oi! I told you you're noisy! The walls are thin so if you don't shut up I can't sleep dumbass!"

As a result, when he came across his neighbour when leaving his apartment the next day, he wound up being grabbed by the collar and so warned—

But Ajimura listened on with cold eyes.

—What's with this guy.

The man's dyed hair was kept in a regent hairstyle*, and it was obvious from one look that he was a delinquent.

(*The stereotypical pompadour of Japanese smalltime gangsters.)

—Why does he have to make me angry, when I'm the one with the proper job.

Normally he would be nodding fearfully, but now he was at the peak of his anger, he listened on with a different mood from usual.

"You do it again, I'll tell the landlord! Dumbass!"

His threat had not been to use violence; from an objective point of view the man was relatively peaceable—

But faced with this rude yelling, Ajimura realised how to prove Dark Owl's righteousness.

—That's right. It's fine so long as it's not assault.

—It's fine so long as I make it so Dark Owl is meting justice to scum.

He did not know nor care about the profiles of the victims so far.

Nonetheless, Ajimura had realised.

What he, as the model for Dark Owl, ought to do.

A few nights later.

On a moonless street, as he looked at the fallen form of his neighbour, bleeding from the head, Ajimura thought.

He had begun; there was no stopping now.

What rose in his heart was not fear, but exhilaration.

For he felt that in this moment he had become Dark Owl.

Yet—

In the series itself, **Dark Owl was by no means 'an ally of justice targeting only criminals'.**

If normal fans like Yumasaki and Karisawa knew of this, surely they would yell angrily, 'You're not a fan!' In the first place, Yumasaki and Karisawa already avoided Ajimura's fansite, their logic being, 'Those aren't fans, they might even be worse than haters.'

Yet Ajimura could care less about being different from the character in the actual OPD.

His own life was OPD, and from now on the series would be corrected to match him. Or at least, this was what he believed.

But in the first place, for all he instigated others on the fansite—

He had only seen the OPD anime in passing, and had not even bought the DVD or comics.

Convinced that, since it was his life, there was no need to confirm it.

And, once he had assaulted his neighbour, he lost all logical restraint.

He would observe delinquents in his vicinity, predict their patterns of movement, and attack them in the night on deserted streets.

Yet, even though he had only targeted and disposed of the type of person the public would call scum, television continued to introduce him as a ‘serial assaulter’.

“Not yet, it’s not enough yet. No one understands because there hasn’t been enough.”

In the convenience store he worked part-time at, Ajimura glanced, keeping an eye on the delinquent groups and gangsters loitering in the parking lot, and muttered to himself.

“That Horada guy was just small fry, huh... There hasn’t been much fuss on the net... Worse. I need to hunt worse trash. I need to hunt every one of those idiots...”

A famous gangster. A person of such scale he could become a hero just by defeating them.

During his break at work, Ajimura searched for information with his smartphone.

Tokyo; delinquent; famous.

Searching with these keywords—one man’s name came up right away.

It was a name he knew himself.

For a young person living in the vicinity of Ikebukuro, it was impossible not to know.

For that man was dubbed, alongside the Headless Rider, as an urban legend of Ikebukuro.

Cold sweat trickling down his cheek, with resolve in his eye, Ajimura spoke the

man's name.

"Heiwajima... Shizuo, huh..."

♂♀

Shinra's apartment.

"You're looking for the Slugger, Celty?"

Shinra asked in surprise.

Shinra generally did not probe into Celty's work, but as Celty had been the one to ask him if he had heard anything about the Slugger, he came to know what Celty had been doing the past few days.

'Yeah, it's the freelance job Snake Hands I mentioned recently. We got a job to gather information on the Slugger.'

"That's dangerous! This is the Slugger we're talking about, what if you get hurt!"

'I think you said the same thing when I started out as a courier...'

"I've already accepted that you want to be a courier, but Celty, I'm worried that you'll be used by this dubious Snake Hands group. Aren't those kids just treating you as a convenient weapon to protect themselves, like Aoba-kun?"

To Shinra, who was genuinely concerned, Celty nodded and replied,

'It's fine. If that happens I'll just classify it as part of the job and do only as much as I'm paid for. Anyway, I'm not so weak that the Slugger can do anything to me...'

"If you say so..."

It appeared he had accepted her justification for now.

Because Celty had experience being embroiled in various events in the past, Shinra seldom commented on her putting herself in danger.

But it seemed he was particularly concerned about situations like this, where she became involved on the behest of others.

Rather than getting injured, he was likely more worried she would be taken advantage of, and find herself in undesirable circumstances.

Celty, understanding this, typed additional information to lessen his worry:

‘Plus, the ones who hired us were Yumasaki and Karisawa. It’s a safe job, in a sense.’

“Them? Why?”

Celty proceeded to explain what Kuon had told her to dispel Shinra’s confusion.

“I see... I get what’s going on, but... I never thought the assaults were this serious. I haven’t been seeing the news recently, so I never realised.”

‘That’s because you only read the articles to do with me.’

“Of course Celty! Ignoring the annoying lies about you having a boyfriend, you coming back to the city started so many discussions! I feel so proud, it’s like we have a celebrity in the family.”

‘Uh... I’m quite sure I’m actually famous as a criminal, I doubt that’s something to be proud of.’

Being self-aware that she was a courier that drove around without a number plate or headlights, Celty naturally felt bad about being proud of herself for being famous.

Detecting Celty’s awkwardness, Shinra changed the topic.

“But even so... Somehow, this Slugger reminds me of that time with Anri-chan.”

‘Yeah, now I think of it. Back then it was a Slasher; now it’s a Slugger. It feels almost absurd.’

“Speaking of Anri-chan, how’s Sonohara Hall now?”

Celty replied to Shinra happily,

‘Business is pretty good, I think. Masaomi-kun and Saki-chan have been stocking things from all over Japan, so there’s a surprisingly wide variety of goods.’

Because Celty thought of Anri as a younger sister, after Anri’s graduation now and then she would be concerned about her.

They seldom met in person because, like Mikado, Anri was uninvolved with underworld problems; nevertheless they kept in touch via text, and occasionally they would discuss the unusual goods Anri had procured.

‘It seems that Kujiragi woman also sends things to her now and then... The shop may have a pretty exotic lineup.’

“I see... She seemed the type to have weird things like that. The police never went after her, right?”

And your father’s a regular customer. I heard he checks in whenever he’s in the country.’

“Ah... I hope he’s not obstructing business...”

Picturing a man in a white gas mask frequenting an antique store, Shinra’s face twitched.

‘But, right... The serial assaults could be related to a curse, like Saika...’

Saika was a demon sword Anri possessed. In the past its curse had plunged Ikebukuro into fear due to serial slashing incidents, but that was a thing of the past.

‘Right, Shinra. Didn’t Kujiragi leave Saika with you? Where did that go?’

“Oh, it’s still around. I promised to return it the next time we met, but we haven’t.”

‘...That actually sounds like it’s going to stay with you forever, you know...?’

“Really? Oh yeah, I haven’t checked on it since we came back from vacation.”

Shinra stood slowly, and opened his cupboard for the medical instruments he used as an underground doctor.

He took out a rod-shaped object wrapped in bandages, and brought it in front of Celty.

‘You just put it in plain sight?!’

Unwinding the bandages revealed a blade in the form of a scalpel, and when Shinra picked it up, his eyes began to glow red.

Saika.

It was a demon sword rumoured since the Edo era to possess its own will, and currently there were a few of it in Japan.

A personality not unlike that of a human female resided within the blade, strangely and uniquely defined by its love for the whole of humanity.

Those cut by the blade would have their hearts consumed by a flood of ‘Words of Love’ and become ‘children’ of Saika, controlled by the sword’s user.

Should the user not have willpower strong enough they would be overtaken by the will of Saika and become no more than a puppet; a personification of ‘love’ in the form of cutting others.

When in use of Saika, the eyes of Saika’s wielder would flash red, while ‘children’ who had been cut would have bloodshot eyes and attempt to slash others with any kind of knife they had so as to generate ‘grandchildren’—such was the dangerous nature of the demon sword Saika.

Shinra had become one of Saika’s ‘children’ post a certain incident. In the end he had not only conquered the curse but come into possession of one of Saika’s parent blades.

And, as if to prove it, Shinra’s eyes started glowing like LEDs.

“See? It’s the real thing.”

‘O, oi, are you okay?! You’re not possessed or...’

“I’m fine. It gets noisy when I hold it, but just seeing your face makes it okay.”

Shinra smiled as he explained, and started to wrap the blade again.

Celty sighed in relief when she saw Shinra’s eyes return to normal.

‘Seriously, you took such a risk back then...’

“It was fine in the end, right? More importantly, take care. If anything happens to you I’ll use this Saika to send all those who hurt you into living hell, fufufufu.”

‘Don’t be creepy.’

Celty, felt nervous again, knowing Shinra was more than capable of executing what he said.

This was why, if anything happened to her, she could not have Shinra dragged into the mess.

In the first place, Shinra numbered amongst the demographic that went out at night; it was hard to say he would be completely safe from the Slugger.

Wanting to keep Shinra safe was also why she wanted to catch the Slugger—but perhaps she was shy, for she never told Shinra this directly.

Just then—Shinra's phone suddenly started to ring.

"Oh, who is it? It's so late... Wait, Shizuo?"

Seeing the screen, Shinra quickly picked up.

"Hello, what happened, it's the middle of the night."

'Did something happen?'

Celty asked Shinra lightly while he was on the phone, and put her ear to it as well.

She could not make out the exact words, but Shizuo sounded panicky.

"OK. We'll keep the door open, so you can take the lift up now."

Sensing that Shinra's voice was becoming more urgent, Celty inferred it was a serious matter.

'What's wrong?'

She asked Shinra this once the call ended, and he returned the scalpel-form Saika to the cupboard, beginning to take out disinfectant and other materials as he answered.

"Ahh, keep the door open, Celty, Shizuo's bringing in a patient."

'Someone's hurt?!"

"Yeah. I think you know him, too. It's Shizuo's senior Tanaka-san. The guy with dreadlocks and glasses."

"He said Tanaka-san was attacked by the Slugger, and injured his head..."

Interlude: Rumours on the Internet 2

Ikebukuro Information Site, *IkeNEW! Version I·KEBU·KUR·O*

New Article, ‘*Citizen Group Releases Statement; Seeks Ban of Owl of the Peeping Dead Film and Anime*’

‘After opposing OPD for so long PCChibukuro finally makes an official statement. If this goes on not just the manga but even the movie might be censored.’

‘Wow Chibukuro. You’re trying to say the Headless Rider, Ripper Night, and even the recent fake kidnappings are the effect of anime, live action movies and manga like OPD. But the Headless Rider’s been in Ikebukuro for more than 20 years...’

‘They finally did it. This group is famous for being kind of ridiculous, but for some reason they have ties to politicians. Hopefully they don’t bring the censorship laws into this.’

‘This is the group which almost had a yakuza film set in Ikebukuro banned from sale when they said it was “glorifying violence organisations like the Awakusu-kai”, right? I have to say, who’s the one who can’t distinguish fiction and reality, here?’

—(Personal posts taken from Twittia)

An excerpt of the statement:

“(Text omitted)—and so, children are innocent creatures, and they hence lack the ability to select pure books and films for themselves. This is why adults like us, with our knowledge of the world, must protect them from those owls that stink of death. To cleanse the environment of Ikebukuro, to restore the wholesomeness of this district, we seek that bookstores, anime shops in particular, withdraw these titles—(text omitted)—The criminal known as the Headless Rider is an obvious result of the influence of games, just as the Slasher case is clear proof of the effects of violently themed anime and manga, or even films and music—(text omitted)—In the same vein, WWW has contracted itself to the devil. They are the destroyers of Ikebukuro, and in a sense more malicious than even the Slugger traumatising Ikebukuro currently. WWW has created a work depicting Ikebukuro’s streets filled with corpses; we demand the immediate recall of all merchandise. If our demands are not met, these missionaries of evil will be punished at the hands of righteous citizens. We will not wait for heaven’s judgment. We will, with our own hands, defend a clear, pure Ikebukuro for our children —(Text omitted)”

IkeNEW! Administrator's Comment

"P.C.Chibukuro is at it *again*-moja. Peoples for the Calm Treatment of IKEBUKURO... It means 'society for the gentle curing of Ikebukuro'-moja, P.C.T.bukuro for short. People call it P.C.Chibukuro-moja.

(*Chibukuro written with the kanji for blood(血chi) bag(袋bukuro), suggesting its unpopularity. 'Chi' is a Japanese pronunciation of 'T'.)

The 'receive judgment by the people' part at the end might even be considered a threat-moja. And you don't have to look twice to feel like the entire thing is threatening-moja.

Frightening-moja. Scary-moja.

The Slugger is frightening, but gangsters coming together to form groups is scary too-moja.

Touch wood-moja."

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*



Excerpts of typical tweets from microblogging site *Twittia*.

That IkeNEW jerk quoted our tweets without asking again.

- Well, there's nothing we can say about it.
 - I don't even care about being quoted anymore, but being used to help affiliate blogs make cash pisses me off.
 - Well, IkeNEW is one of the better ones, at least?
 - No, the way the admin ends sentences is annoying.

Oh look, looks like the geeks are going hysterical in the face of logic. It's a good chance to check all of the accounts that complained against that resident group and chase them off Twitter, isn't it?

- You're annoying go die.
 - Oho, fast and reliable, the anime-icon user arrives to flame rofl
 - This guy's annoying. Screencapped a summary of all his previous problematic tweets.
 - Hey, what are you gonna do with that? If you don't take that down I'll report you~ lol.
 - Thanks.
 - Huh?

- Whoa, he really did it.
- He reported.
 - If you report a Twittia user you get their address and name.
 - Huh? Huh? Huh?
 - You're living around ●● Prefecture. It's famous for textiles, right?
 - What's going on this is a joke right? What is this.
 - Calm down, ●●-kun. I'll call you later lol

Speaking of which, I think I saw the Slugger yesterday.

- Serious? The news didn't say anything.
 - Really? Ah, but there was a guy bleeding from the head at the convenience store nearby.
 - Seriously?
 - Yep, and then a bartender guy was holding him up trying to get him to a doctor.
 - Bartender...? Did he have blond hair and sunglasses by any chance?
 - Ah, yeah. I don't know about the sunglasses but he was blond.
 - The Slugger is dead meat.

I wonder why the criminal is doing this.

- Probably they just want to beat people up?
- No, I get the feeling the victims are alternating between delinquents and normal folk.
 - Isn't that just random?
 - I don't think Ikebukuro's such a dangerous area you can get delinquents half the time by random selection...
 - The attacks on gangsters must have been a fake Slugger.
 - Speaking of which, Ripper Night was weird too. Fifty victims in one night, right?
 - There's no way that was just one person, right...?
 - Was it the Dollars after all...
 - Dollars lol. So nostalgic haha

If PCChibukuro has the time to try and regulate our manga, they should do something about the remnants of the colour gangs we're seeing in real life.

- Dragon Zombie's been running amuck recently... The traffic police did a good job catching them, though.

- The Yellow Scarves aren't around anymore, but... are there still other colour gangs?
 - I think there are still bits of Blue Square around.
 - Colour gangs are seriously outdated, I doubt anything will come of it.
 - The Headless Rider's back, too.
 - Can't we just blame all the Slugger business on the Dollars?
 - I wonder what the old Dollars are up to now.
 - It's embarrassing for anyone to admit they're an ex-member, after all...

「みんなの池袋を守らなきゃ」



止ま
一言早

Chapter 3

Our Ikebukuro Must Be Protected

Why doesn't anyone understand.

Even after this many victims, still there are those who defend that despicable comic. Even the mass media has no initiative.

Is it the movie? Is it because there's a movie?

When it's comics and cartoons they flame all they like, but not the movie. Is it because of the stars acting? Because it has the support of the TV station and major sponsors?

Such things should be no deterrent in this situation. Don't they understand?

Is this not enough?

How much will it take for them to understand?

Understand how dangerous that demon is?

But I cannot stop.

I cannot.

I sold my soul for this.

To warn of the demon's danger, I sold my soul to the demon itself.

I sold my soul.



Shinra's apartment.

"Ah owowow, this sucks, seriously."

Rubbing at his bandaged head, Tanaka Tom sighed quietly.

"Just in case, you should get an X-ray or a CT scan at the hospital in the morning."

Shinra said, and Tom, putting on his glasses, bowed his head.

"Thanks, Doctor. Sorry for coming this late at night."

"Are you all right, Tom-san?"

Shizuo hovered nervously, looking at the bandage, and Tom waved his hand.

"Yeah, I'm fine. That was a close call."

According to them, Tom had been walking nearby when he was attacked.

They had been collecting debts as always, but when they had finally wrapped up late at night, it happened.

While Shizuo was in the convenience store deciding between the cartoned caramel and vanilla au lait—Tom, who had finished buying his things and was waiting outside, drinking his canned coffee in the small parking lot next doors, was assaulted.

Tom had noticed the Slugger almost immediately, and dodged the hammer by inches—but in doing so he had lost his balance, knocked down a bicycle and hit his forehead on the corner of the phonebook shelf of a payphone, where it started bleeding.

By the time Shizuo had heard the noise and come out, Tom saw that the assailter had climbed over the fence and was running away behind the store—but despite that, Shizuo had run towards Tom's injured form first, and so the culprit had just only managed to escape.

"I saw the attacker's back too... He escaped when I saw Tom bleeding and thought, shit... I thought it would be faster to come here than the hospital, so I called. Sorry for the trouble."

Shizuo bowed his head dolefully, and Celty typed in reply,

'You said he was attacked, so I thought he'd been hit by a hammer or something.'

"Nah~, if it were that serious I could've died. But there was a weapon wrapped in bandages; maybe it was a small hammer..."

"In that case it must be that Slugger all over the news lately."

As he said so, Shinra showed them a video from the internet.

It was an anime clip of the Owl of the Peeping Dead character Dark Owl.

"The one who attacked you was this, right?"

"Y, yeah."

For some reason Tom looked at the video uncomfortably, and was glancing back at Shizuo.

Shizuo, who was clearly furrowing his brow under his sunglasses, and asking Shinra,

"Oi, what do you mean, Slugger..."

At his reaction, Celty tilted her helmet.

—Huh?

—Shizuo doesn't know about the Slugger?

—Even if he's not the type to check the news or internet, his senior... Did Tom-san not bring it up at all?

For some reason, Shinra wore an 'oh, crap' expression at Shizuo's reaction.

As Celty puzzled over this on the sidelines, Shinra went quiet for a few seconds, before slowly, he explained the case in as roundabout a way as possible.

"I see... So that's how it is."

Shizuo, having heard Shinra's full explanation a few minutes later, said this under his breath seemingly to himself, and thanked Shinra,

"Anyway, you were a great help, Shinra. Thanks for today."

"Ah, no problem, I guess. You've helped me a lot before, too."

Shizuo turned back casually to Shinra, who was slowly becoming drenched in cold sweat.

"I'll be going out a bit, then. Take care of Tom-san."

"Going? Where?"

"Huh? Isn't it obvious?"

Haha, Shizuo chuckled, before his smile faded, and he said,

"That Slugger bastard who hurt Tom-san, I'm gonna ground him into dust."

—Into dust?!

Shinra and Celty felt shivers run down their spines.

That Shizuo's voice was so unbelievably calm indicated that he was holding back.

He was containing his anger.

It was the calmness he showed when there was no target he could vent his anger out on; the atmosphere right now was similar to once in the past, when, in this same room, he had discovered that Orihara Izaya had framed him, and had given Awakusu Akane a shockingly sweet smile.

'O, oi Shinra, was Shizuo angry because his senior at work got attacked?'

Celty sneaked Shinra a look at her smartphone, to which he whispered back, (Yeah, that's half of it.)

? And the other half?'

(Err... That is... It seems you didn't know, Celty...)

Shinra glanced away, and, shrugging, said,

(That character, Dark Owl?)

'That character, yeah?'

(Yūhei-kun played him in the live action.)

'...What?'

Celty's thought process froze temporarily at the mention of Yūhei.

(We didn't see the movie since we were on our onsen tour, and you probably didn't check on movie information or his fanclub site, right? It was an Easter egg they didn't advertise, a surprise. It's not like he could show his face, plus it's not the kind of thing that would bring in revenue; it's just that his boss thought it would be funny.)

'Yūhei as in... Hanejima Yūhei?'

(Yeah, him. As you know, he's Shizuo's brother.)

Hanejima Yūhei. Real name: Heiwajima Kasuka.

He was Heiwajima Shizuo's younger brother, and a popular young actor.

With that, her previous doubts were answered.

Tom had avoided mentioning the Slugger in front of Shizuo.

If there was a serial assaulter rampaging through the city disguised as a character from a film of his brother Yūhei, the very character Yūhei was playing no less, it was obvious what would happen. Tom had probably anticipated it would not bode well, and refrained from mentioning the case to Shizuo.

That foreboding had escalated with Tom being attacked.

The rage against the culprit that fuelled Shizuo's violent impulses had escalated.

—Oh no, someone will die.

—It's true the Slugger deserves it, but at this rate they'll really be ground to dust...!

Beside Celty, who was still dazed at the situation, Shinra said to Shizuo, "W, wait Shizuo-kun, how are you planning to find the Slugger?"

"Huh...? I just have to mash anyone I see wearing that into the ground, right...?"

"I didn't ask how you're going to go about your pulverising! And that won't make dust, it'll be mince!"

Shinra argued against this completely unimportant detail. From behind him, Tom scolded Shizuo,

"Oi, Shizuo. There's no point. There are plenty of people with that set of pajamas."

"...? What do you mean?"

Shizuo tilted his head, to which Shinra replied,

"Ah, right, it's like this. Since this whole thing some people have been buying lots of the same mascot suit as the criminal. I don't know if it's a stand against the police, but now and then you see them walking along the street wearing that. Right, Celty?"

'Yeah... It's not everywhere, but... I've seen a number.'

"...Now you mention it, I might have seen some too..."

Shizuo rested his hand on the wall, and began to mutter, perhaps to himself,

"But... If you think about it, well I don't know if it's for fun or whatever but wearing some weird costume around in public counts as threatening people, right...? Someone could get shocked and have a heart attack and die, right...? So if taking all that into consideration those people must be prepared to be ground to dust too, right...?"

'Wait wait wait! Calm down, Shizuo!'

Celty hurried to placate Shizuo, the direction of whose thoughts would clearly end in catastrophe.

—What's going on. He finally toned down recently, too!

—And that Slugger! Of all things, doing something like this...!

The possibility that the culprit could be suicidal crossed her mind. She continued to coax Shizuo.

'The police are searching high and low for the culprit, and I'm looking too, so let us do our jobs, okay?'

In this manner, Celty, alongside Tom and Shinra, were able to convince Shizuo—with Tom delivering the decisive statement, 'I wouldn't want you to go thrashing Ikebukuro because of me; wouldn't your brother think the same way?' And so Shizuo barely managed to contain his anger.

"...I got it. I'll back down since you're so against it, Celty, Tom-san..."

"Huh? What about me? Ugomomomo..."

Gagging Shinra's mouth as he spoke up unnecessarily, Celty relaxed for the time being.

'All right, anyway, you should just make sure Tom gets home safely today.'

"Yeah, thanks, Celty."

After saying this, Shizuo stared straight at Celty—and stated a request of his own.

"But if you find the Slugger, make sure I'm first to know, okay...? Yeah?"

'What?'

"You're looking for the culprit, right? The Slugger?"

—Crap.

'Ah, I guess.'

"If you find the culprit before the police, I just want to have a talk with that person."

'That's...'

"Don't worry, I just want to talk. Maybe there's a much deeper reason why they did something like that..."

He had only pushed his anger down inside. It appeared it was still roiling beneath the surface.

'Ah, I'll try.'

Despite sensing an endless amount of killing intent towards the perpetrator in Shizuo's voice, Celty answered ambiguously and sent him and Tom to the door.

On the way out Tom had whispered, 'Sorry, I'll take some time to calm him down too,' but even with the mental support of those words, after the two had left, Celty slid down bonelessly to sit in the corridor.

"Are you okay, Celty?"

'Yeah... Thanks, Shinra. I'm fine.'

Despite typing this, Celty's heart swirled with anxiety and confusion.

'I can't see things ending well for us if he finds out I passed the Slugger to Yumasaki before him.'

'So what do I do if I catch the Slugger now...?'



The next day. Midmorning. Raira Academy Library.

On the day that began the second half of the long holiday, Yahiro, who had volunteered as a library committee member to help organise the bookshelves, made his way to school.

Perhaps many people had free schedules; a third of the members were able to participate, and they went to and fro between the library and the librarian's office, tidying the library.

There was less work to be done than expected, and at this pace they would likely be done before the morning was over.

A thought occurred to Yahiro, and he approached the club president during their break time.

"Um, President?"

"Hey, Mizuchi-kun. What's up?"

"Do you... know about the Slasher case?"

"...More or less, I guess? Since it happened awhile after I started here."

The club president wore a friendly smile as he said this. Yahiro asked further,

"There's the Slugger going around now, right? Do you think it could be... the same person?"

"Hmmm, why do you think that?"

"I've been scared that the Slugger will attack me, so I've been running through all these things in my head..."

After a moment of hesitation, Yahiro told the club president directly,

"I... think the Slugger isn't just one person."

"And why do you think that?"

"...You might think I'm weird saying this, but I've been thinking about strategies if the Slugger attacks, all this time, and I looked up about all the different attacks... I couldn't think of one succinct solution. Like there was a detail missing..."

Perhaps he was curious about what his junior was saying, lacking in confidence as it sounded; the club president replied while opening the window,

"Strategies... as in what to do if you're attacked?"

"Ah, yeah. ...You might think I'm weird."

"No way. It's never bad to be prepared. Though I suppose the best strategy would be not to go out at night."

It was airtight logic. Yahiro went silent.

He felt slightly guilty that he was initiating involvement with the Slugger.

"So, how do you think the Slasher is related to this?"

"Ah, right. I heard there were rumours that the Slasher was a coordinated group of people... And there were people saying it was a gang war, too. Something called the Dollars, and the Yellow Scarves... Do you know about that?"

"Yeah, a little."

The club president smiled faintly. Yahiro elaborated on his theory.

"I thought maybe a mixed group like the Dollars could be working together for a common objective. That might account for the different methods used in the attacks..."

"They might not even have a common objective."

"Huh?"

Yahiro tilted his head at the sudden statement.

The library committee president brushed the accumulated dust from the books out of the window, and said, evenly,

"What if there are multiple Sluggers with completely different goals? It doesn't matter which is the original and which is the copycat. In this case, if you only look at the resulting crimes, then it's natural to be unable to come up with a distinct profile for the culprit."

"I see... That is a possibility."

"I think the police must have long realised this already, though. Even just looking at the victims, there's an inordinate number of gangsters."

"Ah, my friend said that too."

Yahiro remembered the conversation with Himeka, and in his mind things slowly became clear.

"Mm. I think you can think of the Slugger targeting gangsters as a separate person for the time being. If you assume that, do you still feel weird when you think about your strategies?"

"..."

After being told this, Yahiro relooked information with his smartphone, and re-simulated his strategies to deal with a Slugger attack.

As a result—the criminal's behavioral patterns synchronised for at least the attacks on gangsters, and he was able to develop acceptable counter-strategies.

"...Thanks so much, President. I'll think about it."

"Thinking is fine, but don't put yourself in danger, yeah?"

The club president said this as he smiled and closed the window, almost as though he had seen through Yahiro.

Yahiro bowed his head again, and just then the school bell chimed, signalling the end of their recess.

"Oh, is it time? It's weird to hear the school bell ringing during the holidays."

The club president smiled, and as he returned to his work, he looked at Yahiro and said,

"There's one thing you don't need to worry about. I don't think it's related to the Slasher."

Was there anything to be relieved about if it wasn't the Slasher?

Despite thinking this, Yahiro decided that perhaps knowing the criminal was not armed with a knife was indeed a relieving prospect.

While Yahiro rationalised this in his own mind, the club president smiled wryly and added,

"Well, it's just a gut feeling, though."

After Yahiro had gone, the library committee president looked back at the window, and exhaled.

He touched the multiple stab wounds in his abdomen under his uniform, and he—Ryugamine Mikado—murmured softly,

“The Voices are mostly gone... But it still affect my eyes, huh.”

Looking at his own reflection in the windowpane, a small smile came onto his face.

At first, bitter. But then his smile grew reassured.

By giving himself over to the Curse of Saika temporarily, he had ascertained one thing—that the same curse was not active elsewhere in Ikebukuro.

The curse had entered him when in the past, a man possessed by Saika had stabbed him repeatedly.

By now little of it remained, but he was able to use it at least to detect other traces of the curse.

Finding those traces faint in the district, and hence confirming that his loved one was not involved in the Slugger incidents, reassured him like nothing else.

It was as if, just by knowing that, he saw no need to step into the underworld of Ikebukuro.

Meanwhile, Yahiro returned to his own workstation, thinking about the club president.

—Ryugamine-sempai’s eyes looked really red just now...

—Maybe he’s been working since before the rest of us came in.

—I have to work hard, too...

With this, Yahiro went back to his own work. Not only his work as a library committee member, but as Snake Hands.

Oblivious to the echoes of the extraordinary beside him.



Raira General Hospital. Private ward.

“Are you okay, Horada-sempai?”

Aoba said with a friendly smile. Horada’s face twitched as he answered,

“Y, yeah. Thanks for the help.”

“I was surprised, when you suddenly told us to look for the Slugger. You’ve given your testimony, so I thought you would’ve just entrusted it to the police.”

Horada felt a strange pressure from his Blue Square junior that had come to visit, but assuming it was his own imagined afterimage of the boy’s brother Izumii Ran, he shook his head to clear away the fear.

“Ow!”

The pain came back when he shook his head, and Horada fell back onto the bed.

“What’s wrong?”

“N, nothing.”

As if to hide what had happened, he answered Aoba’s previous question with unnecessary vigour:

“Yeah! I’m the man who was the face of Blue Square! What pride do I have if I back down now? Right?”

“You have your point, but...”

“Don’t worry; I kept some information from the police.”

“?! Really?”

Seeing the surprise on Aoba’s face, Horada felt assured in his own advantage.

The information he had withheld was that there had been two Sluggers.

He had told the police there had only been one Slugger.

No one had testified that there had been two anyway, and even if he was questioned afterwards for any inconsistency, he could probably excuse himself saying he had lost the memory after being hit in the head.

Izumii had said to get to the culprit before the police. It was better to hide the truth from the police and confuse them.

—Ahhh... But... What do I say?

—Saying two people ganged up and beat me up still sounds kinda lame...

After some thought, Horada’s born pettiness had its time to shine, and he

gave an immensely exaggerated answer.

“Well... I knocked down the first two or three just fine, but...”

“Huh?”

“Even I can’t hold up against more than five people...”

“...”

Aoba fell into thought at Horada’s account.

At Aoba’s expression, Horada swore in his mind.

—Oh shit. Shit, did I overdo it?!

—I should have kept it to three... What kind of assaulter goes around in fives! That’s just gang violence!

Forgetting that this was exactly what he and his juniors went around doing, Horada waited, in cold sweat, for Aoba’s reply.

He was prepared to be exposed—

But surprisingly, Aoba reconfirmed it with a serious expression:

“In other words... you’re saying it was a group?”

“Huh? O, oh. Isn’t that what I said? If it weren’t, you know there’s no way I’d have gone down! ...I haven’t told the police about this part, so be careful.”

“Understood. We won’t alert the police.”

“H, huh?”

It was weird that the boy acquiesced so readily, but Horada accepted it quickly.

—Yosh, he’s actually quite obedient, isn’t he? He believed it just like that.

—Is this because of my track record too?

He optimistically chose to credit his natural charisma.

Unwitting of the thoughts turning in Aoba’s mind.



A few minutes later. Outside the hospital.

“Yo, Aoba, how was he?”

To his gang members, who had been waiting outside the hospital, Aoba replied quietly,

“Mm... Things might be more troublesome than expected.”

“What does that mean?”

“There’s more than one Slugger... I more or less expected that, but it seems they also coordinate their attacks.”

“Huh?”

With that, Aoba recounted what Horada had told him.

“...And that’s how it is.”

“You’re serious? You’re sure he didn’t just make it up? That guy’s all about his image.”

Aoba, though he half-agreed with his friend’s obvious suspicion, shook his head.

“If he’s telling us to catch the culprit for him, there’s no reason for him to lie. Anyway my brother seems to have threatened him, so I don’t think he’s just throwing his weight around for the sake of it.”

Aoba had grasped Horada’s character completely without even being told that he was acting on instruction of his brother—Izumii Ran.

“Mmm, I don’t get him. He’s small fry no matter how I see it, but he continually exceeds expectations. And how did he locate the kidnapper’s base during the false kidnapping incident...?”

Aoba, unable to reach the true conclusion of ‘pure coincidence’, felt increasingly disturbed by Horada.

Everything about the way he talked and his appearance indicated that he was only a smalltime gangster, and indeed he had been no more than another Blue Square member in the palm of Aoba’s hand during the Yellow Scarves takeover, yet—.

—Did something happen in jail after all?

—There might be something going on that I'm not aware of.

The two-faced personality of Aoba himself led him to be suspicious of Horada.

He was trapped by the idea that possibly Horada had a darker side to him, or something was happening without his knowledge.

"That insignificant vibe he has could be a camouflage. A weapon, in a sense."

"What's camouflage?"

"Look it up, won't you?"

After this conversation, Aoba headed for the front gate of the hospital, contemplating the current case.

He had grasped the culprit's agenda to some degree.

Yet Horada being attacked by multiple people complicated things.

Multiple Sluggers, each with their own objective.

Or in the worst scenario, multiple of them with the same objective, as a coordinated group?

It was possible as well that a delinquent group was carrying out copycat offences to get rid of multiple eyesores at one go.

"Damn, things aren't quite going as expected."

Aoba took out his phone, and began to type a message.

"Who're you texting?"

"The Headless Rider."

"What?"

The other gang members frowned in confusion, and Aoba grinned.

"I have to collect on that favour, from when I sent her Tatsugami Himeka's picture."

Saying this, Aoba pressed the send button.

The content of the message was simple in itself—

But it exaggerated the situation just enough to fan the flames of its recipient's

unease.

[Celtysan.

Hello, this is Aoba.

This is sudden, but could you assist us in looking for the Slugger?

If you find the perpetrators, please bring them to us if possible.

It's likely that the Sluggers number in the tens.

In the worst case scenario, this could become a replay of Ripper Night.]

♂♀

Shinra's apartment.

'What's this?!

After receiving Aoba's message Celty complained thusly at Shinra, before keeling over onto the sofa.

"Which one? Let me see?"

Shinra borrowed Celty's phone, and selected the message that appeared most recent.

His eyes grew blatantly irritated when he saw that the sender was Kuronuma Aoba.

"Ah..."

'I was surprised Aoba too would be asking me about the Slugger in the first place, but here he's saying it might turn into Ripper Night, what do I do now! Why are there tens of Sluggers?!'

"It can't be there really is a demon sword or something mystical involved...?"

'Are you saying now we have a demon hammer on our hands?!"

Celty cried out in a panic, but Shinra said, solemnly,

"I've heard about it... The demonic hammer 'Bannanjin', that possesses humans and amplifies their desires... Could it be..."

'Wait! Stop! Don't make it more complicated than it is already!"

"Well, that aside, isn't that actually a good thing, Celty? If there are multiple Sluggers, we can pass one to Shizuo, and the rest to Yumasaki-kun and friends. Aoba-kun can get the leftovers."

'Don't say it like you're distributing souvenirs!'

Regaining her calm through her exasperation at Shinra, Celty stood from the sofa.

'But what does it mean if there really are multiple? Could it really be related to bōsōzoku?'

"I dunno. The media has been making a huge fuss over it, so some people might have been inspired to imitate."

'Copycat offenders, you mean...?'

The theory made sense, and so Celty began to imagine the profile of a copycat offender.

—It has to be the type of person who'd see the Slugger on the news and decide to do the same thing.

—I doubt it could be anyone upstanding... At the very least, I don't expect it to be an adult.

'Well, in any case, it should be one of those young gangsters or delinquent students who don't think before acting...'



Shirobishi Yōko was a serial assaulter.

She had full awareness of this.

She was also aware that her actions were wrong.

But she believed it was wrongdoing in the name of justice.

She believed that therefore her crimes were forgivable, pushing all of the blame onto others, continued to assault complete strangers.

Yōko, 38 years old this year, was a self-proclaimed online writer, but in truth she earned only a few thousand yen through advertising, and was living off the inheritance from her parents.

The Buddhist altar in the house was bereft of offerings, and it felt as though the dusty portraits of her parents were looked down on the room with disapproval.

However, she was hardly bothered by this.

Because she believed she was living for a higher purpose.

Harmony.

Harmony of the world.

Harmony of the times.

Her own life was the payment for a beautiful world that could achieve harmony of all things.

She could not be distracted by tending to such private affairs as maintaining the altar of her deceased parents.

This was what she truly thought; and deeming everything from her ceremonial duties to her parents to even the cleaning of her own home trivial and thus acceptable to ignore, she continued her fight against the unfair world with words as her weapon.

Even the few-thousand yen annual income she earned was due to the bombardment of comments on her site.

It was natural that when attacking a source of disharmony one would end up targeted by those seduced by the perversion of the world.

This was what she wrote on her site, but to put it simply, she was only picking fights with all of these parties.

A fraction of the people who came to check out the drama would click on the advertisements, giving her income.

What ‘disruption of harmony’ meant to her was, simply put, the stirring of people’s hearts.

‘Stirring’ could refer to anything that evoked excitement, fear, anger, laziness, lust, or other similar emotions.

Comics with explicit sexual content were naturally her enemy, as were all

horror films depicting cruelty, police dramas with gunfights, and even art pieces portraying nudity.

The most controversial incident was probably when she had tried to have the Venus de Milo removed from textbooks, citing that it was a violent, misogynistic work that promoted the concept that a woman was more beautiful with her arms amputated.

It was debated whether the sculpture had had arms originally, or if it had been made armless from the start, but to Yōko how it became that way was irrelevant; the mere existence of it, acknowledged as a work of art, was enough to irk her, and she claimed it was a defilement of human society.

Being that she was so violently objected to a mere historical artwork, of course her stand against drama serials, comics and such was outright antagonistic.

She was especially opposed to a media series titled *Owl of the Peeping Dead*.

It was about the last survivors in an Ikebukuro overrun by zombies—what Yōko felt towards this setting went beyond dislike; it was a primal terror.

She could not wrap her mind around the idea of ‘zombies’; of the dead returning to life and attacking humans.

How would the creators take responsibility if children who saw that thought that people would continue walking around even after being killed? It was with that same thinking that Yōko had once been a member of a community group advocating the ban of zombie films, though they had been forcibly disbanded after employing extreme methods with their campaigns.

To make it worse, these zombies were supposed to be all over the district of Ikebukuro.

—Our streets are being debauched.

To her, the launchings of the film and anime were equivalent to flooding Ikebukuro with gasoline and sewage at the same time.

From the moment there were residents desiring the presence of this horror, the ‘harmonious world’ she visualised had begun to crumble. At the very least,

she herself believed this.

On a side note, she did not know the exact plot of *Owl of the Peeping Dead*.

She had never seen the manga or anime, much less the movie.

To her, the synopsis and the images brought up just by searching were sufficient reason.

The setting of zombies appearing in Ikebukuro.

The posters with blood-spattered images.

That was more than enough for her to despise it.

It was unforgivable that violent elements were being introduced into a pre-existing city.

There were those who questioned her: ‘How do you know the content if you haven’t even seen it?’

Yōko replied straightaway to these people,

‘I don’t have to see it.’

‘The fact that people like you who are attacking my character support it is the greatest proof of how damaging this work is.’

Of course the forum on her website and her social media accounts attracted drama; all ranging from those who tried logical persuasion to anonymous flamers flocked to her site.

Then she would pick out only the flamers and post those messages on her site, saying, ‘The supporters of that vulgar film consist of people who use speech in this manner.’

She ignored the logical ones.

It was not because she was speechless; her thoughts on this were, ‘On first sight they seem calm, but to be calm and still support this series already means they must have been completely brainwashed. It’s unlikely they can be persuaded otherwise. How pitiful.’ It was not an excuse; she believed this from the bottom of her heart and pitied them.

For Yōko, her vision of the world was itself justice, and she could only see any

who supported alternative views as evil demons, or pitiful victims of brainwashing.

What was frightening was that there were some people who approved of her.

Because she presented herself as doing this ‘to ensure a beautiful future of our children’, often those who supported that cause would gradually be influenced by her. Her unshakable faith acted as charisma, in a sense.

Furthermore, for those who aimed to censor films and drama serials, or comics and games, Yōko was a convenient tool.

Certainly they understood that her thinking was extreme. But being in a position to manage the illegal actions of her flamers, such as verbal abuse and death threats, was a clear advantage.

If Yōko received a death threat, all they had to do was dramatise it as, ‘This is how those who read overexplicit manga behave,’ and they could control the public’s perspective. Naturally this would be ineffective if the public realised Yōko herself was problematic, so they were careful not to cast her as too much of a victim.

Despite all of this plotting going on around her, Yōko remained completely oblivious as she continued her activities.

She founded Peoples for the Calm Treatment of IKEBUKURO with her like-minded peers, and launched a relentless attack on *Owl of the Peeping Dead*.

The battle continued for a few years.

On the other side of the story, both anime and film adaptions became enormous hits, with zombies overtaking the district.

During Halloween the previous year, the companies producing and publishing OPD respectively had held an event to promote dressing as zombies.

Her allies who tried to stop the event had been arrested for attempting to disrupt the event.

‘But we only trashed the venue of that disgusting zombie event as a form of cleansing.’

This was what she and her comrades thought, unapologetic—but when the

popularity of OPD did not falter, and they began to grow weary and impatient.

But just then—a miracle occurred.

To her, it was a godsend.

Someone dressed as an OPD character had committed assault.

Through the internet, she had learnt that the perpetrator was dressed as the character Dark Owl even before it had been reported.

Everything will end with this.

Victory is ours.

With this, the public would understand the horror of people whose hearts had been tainted by evil fiction.

The victim of the Slugger was a sacrifice for the sake of harmony, surely.

They were both sincerely regretful and sincerely happy for the assault.

However—

The media did not make public that it was Dark Owl, and reports on the crime faded within the day.

What is this?

Had OPD bought the mass media with money?

Hope became despair.

Society did not seek harmony.

Confronted with this fact, she flew into her rage, as if her entire life had been rejected.

After destroying several objects in her home, bitterly, she wept into her pillow, weeping, weeping—

When suddenly, the thought struck.

Was the sacrifice not yet enough?

Was it necessary for more precious sacrifices in the name of harmony?

Realising this—she spoke to her confidantes.

Not the members of political groups that were trying to use her, but the small number that truly shared her views.

With a long, long process of persuasion—the ‘Missionaries of Harmony’, with Yōko at their fore, arrived at one solution.

To sell their souls to the demon, so as to slay the demon itself.

“This is the only way, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Apologising, she would continue to assault the pedestrians even after they had fallen.

Each time she heard the cries of her victims.

Each time she saw the blood flowing, she felt it keenly.

The unsalvagable ‘taint’ wrapped around herself.

From the shell consisting purely of the filth that was Dark Owl.

But this as well was one step towards Ikebukuro’s harmony.

When the day came that Ikebukuro was fully cleansed, this shell would shatter, and she would be reborn in the truest sense.

Believing this, she continued to accumulate crimes as Dark Owl.

It was likely that until people realised the evil within Dark Owl, and the series OPD that contained the character, her steps would not falter.

But one day she noticed.

That besides herself—another person, likely a genuine assaulter, had begun to target the delinquent scum of the city.

“Ahh, it’s come...”

She murmured.

She did not know if this Slugger was the original criminal.

Nevertheless, Yōko was certain this person was a vile ally of OPD who sought to obstruct the harmonious activities of herself and her comrades.

She was convinced that through cleaning the streets of scum and creating a false harmony, this person was attempting to appeal to the public that OPD was safe.

"More... More must be sacrificed..."

There was only one way to fight back.

To take the blood of even more sacrifices, and wash the streets of Ikebukuro.

Yōko was enveloped with anticipation for the difficult battle ahead; her gaze did not falter.

Because all of this was for the sake of Ikebukuro's future.

With that ideal in her chest, this very evening, she sought another sacrifice.

For the sake of Ikebukuro. To defend Ikebukuro from these evil usurpers.

On this day, once again, Yōko gripped the bandage-bound hammer that was the symbol of evil itself.

On a side note, this woman lived in Saitama, not Ikebukuro.

Interlude: Rumours on the Internet 3

Ikebukuro Information Site, *IkeNEW! Version I・KEBU・KUR・O*

Latest article, *Admin's Prediction! Two Sluggers in Ikebukuro?!*

IkeNEW! Administrator's Comment

"Looking closer I noticed something about the Slugger case-moja.

The attacks don't seem to be all by the same person-moja.

If you look at the cases on a map, the area where normal people get assaulted and the area where gangsters like bosozoku or colour gang members get assaulted are separate-moja.

One might be a colour gang war-moja.

At this point anyone can put on a Dark Owl costume and do anything, and blame it on the Slugger-moja.

This means the couple who were attacked first are either regular civilians or the delinquent type-moja.

Well, it's started already, so it's not important-moja.

Will the city fall into Dark Owl's hands-moja?

Even so it's strange-moja.

The police should be tracking CCTV footage-moja.

This is still going on even when everyone's getting vigilant, so does that mean both sides have methods to escape the police?

Or is there another reason-moja?

If there really are two culprits, I want a round of applause-moja."

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*

Excerpts from the site's comments.

I already knew.

More importantly admin what the hell's that weird Snake Hands ad *(Comment was deleted a few minutes later)

It took so long?! I knew before the holidays even started.

Where's the source? The news never reported the exact crime scenes or whether they were delinquents or not.

Ahowowowowow

Wait, isn't it insensitive to ask for applause when people are getting hurt here?

The admin is the culprit.

Always with the moja, shut the fuck up.

The culprit is a hostess.

Is there really a Slugger? Are you sure it's not just a ruse by the media?

Oi, why do comments get deleted if we talk about Snake Hands? *(Comment was deleted a few minutes later)

Snake Hands *(Comment was deleted and the commenter was banned)



Twittia.

Excerpts of typical tweets from microblogging site *Twittia*.

The IkeNEW admin's finally resorted to spreading paranoia?

- Not paranoia, looks like they just copy-pasted what people were arguing about on Twitter.
 - Seriously? What an ass...

Is the Slugger linked to the Headless Rider too?

- Must we blame everything on the Headless Rider?
 - If we don't think of suspects it might be hard to catch the real culprit...
 - It was a joke, why so serious...

Regardless, it's probably Owl of the Peeping Dead that's suffering the most.

- Protect the peace of Ikebukuro! #OperationEradicateOwlOfThePeepingDead
- The future of our children is being tainted. #OperationEradicateOwlOfThePeepingDead

- Protect Ikebukuro from these evil fictions. #OperationEradicateOwlOfThePeepingDead
 - What...
 - Yeah, if you don't shorten OPD you'll get spammed with these. Think it's a PCChibukuro publicity stunt.
 - It looks like there are tens of people in PCChibukuro.
 - Are you serious. Do they not realise it's counterproductive.
 - I doubt they can differentiate reality from delusion.

Dragon Zombie will be next, won't they?

- Huh? That gang's still around?
 - The boss came back or something, they've been running about a lot recently.
 - I wish the Slugger would just hunt down those bike gangs. Seriously.
 - Dollars is gone, too.
 - It's really gone?
 - What are you talking about?
 - Isn't it possible Dollars and Yellow Scarves are behind the scenes of this?
 - Didn't Dollars have a natural death already?
 - Yep, natural death. They never announced they were disbanded.
 - So it wouldn't be surprising if they rise from the dead like zombies, right?

「俺に任せて先にいけ」



Chapter 4

Go On Ahead, Leave This to Me

Somewhere in Ikebukuro. Commercial Building Hall of Treasures, 4th Floor.

It was a commercial building some distance from Ikebukuro station.

It did not occupy a large area. The first floor sold miscellanies imported from Taiwan, the second floor was a Taiwanese restaurant, and the third was a bookstore; the amalgamation of different businesses lent an air of liveliness to the block.

The fourth floor was used as an event space for the resident businesses by rotation, but when unoccupied oftentimes it was borrowed by some people as a hangout, specifically the group of Ei Li-pei, a relative of the landlord and leader of Dragon Zombie.

“That’s how it is. So do you have any idea who the Slugger might be, Li-pei-san?”

At Yahiro’s words, Li-pei shook his head incredulously.

“No... You came all the way here to ask that?”

“Yes.”

“Good job finding this place.”

“I asked Kuon-kun.”

Yahiro answered calmly. Li-pei snorted.

“Well well. Kuon’s that green-haired kid, right? I wonder why he knew? Ah, it’s not important.”

Li-pei’s sisters stood beside him, and other Dragon Zombie members loitered around the event space, keeping a wary eye on Yahiro from a distance.

“I was hoping you’d say you were here to join us... But I guess that was expecting too much...?”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you don’t have to apologise... But isn’t it scary? Coming by yourself to a bōsōzoku hangout?”

“It’s terrifying.”

Yahiro said this frankly, before he continued,

“But leaving the Slugger unchecked is, um, scarier...”

“Hey, I don’t really wanna say this, but from our perspective you’re scarier than the Slugger, yeah? Snake Hands-kun?”

“Please don’t. I don’t know why that name spread...”

A blush spread over Yahiro’s face, and he looked away.

Li-pei was the very person who had popularised the name, but he kept that tidbit to himself and shook his head.

“Stranger things have happened. But it’s all right. The name fits you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Then maybe it’s okay...?”

Seeing Yahiro tilt his head considerably, Li-pei laughed and said,

“Well; it’d be a great help to us as well if you caught the Slugger. We’ll help you in any way we can if it comes to it, yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“But well, we’ve been trying to investigate the case, too. To be frank, it became our business since the moment we became suspect ourselves.”

“Really?”

“There are two culprits... That’s what some people are saying. But there are also those pointing fingers at us. Or Blue Square.”

Yahiro was aware of this as well.

Kuon’s sister had spread the rumour on her website that same morning, and as it had come up in conversation with both Aoba and Himeka, he was far from surprised.

"Blue Square is looking for the culprit too, so I think those rumours are false."

"...Right, you have connections there too, don't you?"

"Just an acquaintance."

"You're safe with me, but you'd best keep that to yourself, yeah? You can get on Toramaru's bad side just by being friendly with Blue Square."

With that, Li-pei smiled wryly, and continued,

"Damn, I really hate to work with them. I guess it's still way better than working with Jyan Jyaka Jyan, but... There's no way we can be seen cooperating on the surface. If we're careless and rumours get out that we're acting in concert, people will start to put their guard up. They'll think we've formed an alliance."

"Is that how it works?"

"That's how it works."

Yahiro tilted his head, and Li-pei mimicked the action back at him teasingly.

Yahiro was musing on how similar this conversation felt to the one with Kuronuma-sempai, when the thought came to him.

"But I didn't come down to ask you to do anything, I'm just here to talk, so isn't it fine?"

"Is that so? You're one thing, but aren't the kids with you trying to use us?"

Li-pei pointed out, shrugging. Yahiro tilted his head again.

"Hmm... I'm not very good at understanding that kind of thing."

Thinking of Kuon, his employer, Yahiro recalled,

"Ah, but I know he's using me, at least. He said so."

"What an evil kid."

Li-pei shrugged. Yahiro told him,

"But I'm fine with it, so it's okay."

"Huh? Is that the problem?"

Li-pei stared at Yahiro for a moment, before, sighing, he returned to their main topic.

“...Well, if you don’t mind, I guess it’s fine. In any case, neither Dragon Zombie nor Blue Square can take any drastic action. Unlike before this time you don’t have the advantage of numbers over the Slugger, okay? Ah, well, though that time you did it all yourself, in the end.”

At this point, an evil smile crept across Li-pei’s face, and he pointed a finger at Yahiro.

“That’s why... If a mysterious guy like Snake Hands did the Slugger in, the case can reach closure without us nor Blue Square interfering or being suspected. Make sense?”

“...”

After some thought, Yahiro nodded firmly.

“I see, that sounds reasonable.”

“Oh look, he accepted that.”

“I see... I see, and if a mysterious guy catches the culprit, the Slugger won’t have anyone to hold a grudge against, either... So even if they have accomplices no one has to worry...”

After mumbling this to himself, Yahiro looked up brightly, and bowed.

“Thanks, Li-pei-san! I think I get it!”

A few minutes later.

Yahiro had gone home after talking for a little more.

Li-pei watched him leave, and as his back disappeared into the distance, his smile faded, and he murmured,

“He’s in trouble.”

With a face genuinely worried but simultaneously wary, he said to himself,

“Hopefully he has a friend to put brakes on him; whether that friend is the good or bad sort.”



A certain apartment. Kotonami residence.

Kuon, having returned home, prepared his sister's meal and placed it before her room as always, before going back to his own room and opening his laptop.

He organised the collection of information on the screen and contemplated his future plans quietly.

"Now... Things have come along nicely."

Stretching out his arms from his seat on a chair, Kuon smiled faintly.

Right at that moment, the phone he had left on the desk began to vibrate.

"Hello."

'Hi~, Kuon. Doing fine?'

"Yo Nee-chan, your food is outside the door. Eat it before it gets cold."

'Yeah, I know, I know. Just thought I should talk to you a little before that.'

It was routine for him to talk to his sister through the phone despite her being just in the next room.

It was not to put space between them; rather, Kuon knew that this was how he could be closest to her—to Nozomi.

"What did you want to talk about?"

'Are you planning to wrap up the Slugger case within the holidays?'

"I guess. It'll be troublesome once school starts, anyway... Not to mention Yahiro seems to have gone all the way to Dragon Zombie to ask for information. If I just leave things to him it'll blow up too much."

Kuon said tiredly. Mischievously, Nozomi told him,

'You're worried for that boy.'

"I'm not."

'He's your very first friend, after all~.'

"He's not! I've always had friends!"

Kuon ground his teeth, and in return, the voice from the receiver continued teasingly,

‘Just saying, Kuronuma-kun doesn’t count, okay?’

“Eh? No?”

‘I mean, you don’t have a speck of trust in one another, do you?’

“...I don’t think being friends means having absolute faith, though.”

Kuon said, sighing. His sister laughed.

‘Really? But it looks like Yahiro-kun considers you a friend, at the very least.’

“I certainly don’t. That’s just his niceness talking.”

Kuon went quiet briefly, before stating,

“It’s proof enough that I’ll be forcing him to do the dirty work again this time.”

A wicked smile crept over Kuon’s face.

While, surfacing in his mind, was the chance encounter with a researcher he had had a year ago.



One year ago. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

“You want to know about that fool?”

The moment Izaya’s name was mentioned, a look of displeasure came onto the woman’s face.

“I heard you’re the most well-versed when it comes to him.”

At Kuon’s statement, the long-haired woman tsked disgruntledly.

“...I only come back to Japan now and then for work, and this is what I get. I don’t know if he’s alive or dead but he’s still a load of trouble.”

Even saying this, she who had once been Izaya’s assistance—Yagiri Namie—began to share in her own way about Izaya.

“You’re asking how he managed to control the city? You have it wrong just asking that question.”

“What?”

"In most cases, he never controlled the circumstances at all. He only planted seeds. And he was entertained regardless of whether those seeds sprouted or rotted away. No matter the situation he acted like things were turning out his way and enjoyed it, so from an outsider's perspective it looked like everything was in the palm of his hand."

"But I don't think that's all there was to it. Since because of his machinations... there are people whose lives have been messed up..."

A dark fire filled Kuon's eyes as he spoke.

At this point in time, he had yet to dye his hair green, and was still a goody-two-shoes by appearance.

Seeing the light dwelling in his eyes, Namie, perhaps curious, softened.

"...Fuun? You don't admire Izaya; you hate him, don't you?"

"No, I..."

"I'm curious. So I'll tell you: it's true that in many cases, he was in complete control of the situation. Often of the hearts of the people involved, too."

"For that to happen, there was one criteria. It's the number one reason he was so insane, and it's not something you can imitate easily. It's something people in their right minds would never do."

Namie seemed to be reminiscing as she spoke.

"Whenever he truly desired to be in control, he always put himself in the most dangerous position. The deepest, darkest place in the eye of things. It was where he could lose his life at any time that he pulled off the most depraved of things."

"..."

"At the same time, while he remained in a risk-free position, he never succeeded much. Perhaps it was the difference in resolve. People often say the only people who can kill are those prepared to be killed themselves, but Izaya was the kind of man ready to be killed just to punch someone's face."

Namie said this, before looking into Kuon's eyes, and as if she had seen

through to his heart, she concluded,

“If you want to be like him, whether you can go that far is the question.”

“...”

Even while overwhelmed by her pressur Kuon looked back at her unflinchingly, and Namie sighed.

“Well, you can choke in the mud for all I care. Anyone who involves themselves with him in any way end up consumed and destroyed if they don’t brace themselves.”

Why had she not been consumed by Izaya?

Why was it that, despite being so closely involved with him, she had never been brainwashed by him?

When he asked this, Namie looked into the distance, and said, with an enamoured expression,

“My heart has an unbreakable pillar supporting it. It’d take much more than a guy like that to overcome me.”

♂♀

—Yeah.

—My heart has a pillar, too.

Remembering the conversation with Namie, Kuon silently mustered his resolve.

“Nee-chan.”

‘Yeah?’

“I love you, Nee-chan.”

‘Yeah, I know.’

Was it familial? Or romantic? Neither could tell.

But after saying that, Kuon added,

“I hate humans. You’re the only one I like.”

‘Are you saying that for yourself to hear?’

“Yeah. I’m sorry you have to play along with my self-satisfaction.”

‘It’s okay. That’s what siblings are for.’

At the sound of his sister’s chuckling, a small smile appeared on Kuon’s face.

Some time after ending the call, Kuon tightened his fingers around his phone.

Then, leaning his forehead onto the wall facing his sister’s room, in an inaudible whisper, he spoke to himself.

“I can be as evil as it takes. I’ll even do things Orihara Izaya couldn’t; I’ll even use my friends as pawns and go down into hell.”

Kuon’s expression became faintly sorrowful as he added one last sentence.

“...Sorry if I make things hard for you, Nee-chan.”



Last day of Golden Week. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

One of the Sluggers, Ajimura Shōya, was walking in Ikebukuro with a complicated expression.

“Yesterday was dangerous... I didn’t expect him to dodge so quickly...”

That man with dreadlocks who should have been knocked out in one blow had instead dodged the attack.

After that he had fallen and injured himself, but the degree of it was far less than the intended ‘punishment’.

“Shit... Even though he was scum...”

That man was often beside Heiwajima Shizuo.

Ajimura knew that Heiwajima Shizuo was inhumanly strong.

That was why he had tried to deliver the city’s symbol of violence, Heiwajima Shizuo, a psychological punishment by attacking someone close to him.

But his attack had been dodged by a hairsbreadth and a commotion had occurred, and he had only barely escaped being destroyed himself.

—They may be scum, but people used to fighting are still scary.

—And I never expected that Horada guy previously to hit back either, shit!
Shit!

“...”

There Ajimura went abruptly silent, and he sunk deep into thought.

He lacked the self-awareness that he was a serial assaulter, but he no longer hesitated to do what he did.

But—there was a single point that puzzled Ajimura.

There was one thing he did not understand about the time he had brought the hammer of justice down on Horada.

After being struck by the initial retaliation—

When he got up, for some reason the man was lying on the ground and bleeding from the head.

—Who did that?

He had been acting alone.

He did advocate to his site's members that it was not assault but the execution of justice, but he had never gone so far as to admit he had been responsible.

The time was yet ripe for that revelation.

It was too early.

He would reveal to the world that he was Dark Owl after all of the unfair criticisms, such as being labelled an assaulter, were overturned.

At that time he would truly become one with OPD.

He would show the world his true form.

With that, he arrived at the answer to his doubts.

—That must have been a fan of OPD... of me.

The one who had knocked Horada to the ground could have been an ally of his who sympathised with his cause.

He had chosen Horada because he had heard rumours from his allies online

that Horada was a well-known gangster.

Perhaps the other Slugger had done it purely out of hate for Horada.

But coincidence or not, now came a being that had assisted him from the shadows.

Was this not proof that the world had chosen him?

With such thoughts, Ajimura nodded fiercely.

He was doing this for OPD.

Even if he were caught by the police, the charges would probably be lenient.

After all, he was doing their job for them.

Packing his belongings into a Boston bag, Ajimura smiled.

He simply smiled.

—How exciting.

—I knew it. This is my destiny.

Dyeing his hands with the act of assault he had felt truly alive for the first time.

He stepped forward once again, so as to prolong this experience.

While feeling, hidden in the false bottom of his Boston bag, the weight of the bandage-wrapped hammer.

♂♀

Evening Yahiro's apartment.

It was evening when Yahiro returned back to the front of the apartment he lived at.

“Yo, you had fun outside again today, huh.”

The man whistling while washing his van—Togusa Saburō—greeted Yahiro happily.

“Yeah, I went around.”

“Where'd you go?”

“Um... Uh, Hall of Treasures...”

Yahiro decided that there was no real need to hide where he had gone, and answered truthfully.

“Oh, the place with the Taiwanese restaurant. This gang, Dragon Zombie, they have their base there, so be careful not to get caught in any fights, okay?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Saying ‘I went to meet them’ would naturally be problematic, so Yahiro answered vaguely.

“All right~, there’s that Slugger going around recently, so be careful!”

“I will, thanks.”

At that point Yahiro remembered that he had yet to ask Saburō about the Slugger, and so he tried,

“There was a serial assaulter in the past, too, right?”

“Hm? ...Oh, you mean the Slasher?”

There Togusa’s eyes narrowed.

It did not go unnoticed by Yahiro.

It was not the kind of distaste one had when mentioning criminal activity; this clearly ran deeper than that.

—Huh?

—Saburō-san... knows the Slasher?

Yahiro was choosing his words so as to continue, but just then, his phone rang.

“Hello. This is Mizuchi.”

‘Ah, hi~! This is Karisawa. Yappi~, are you free tonight?’

“Ah, hi.”

‘Yappi~’ seemed to be a nickname for him.

Yahiro inferred this, and answered hesitantly.

“Yes, I’m free.”

'Oh, really? So, since the holidays are ending, do you want to meet up to share information?'

"...I see, that's a good idea."

Yahiro wanted to hear what the others had found out as well.

If the Slugger case escalated further, it would truly begin to affect OPD, which would not do.

'OK, so, there are some people I want to introduce, so could you make your way to Tokyu Hands now? Kuocchi says he's busy so he's not coming. Is that okay?'

"Yeah, no problem. Thank you very much."

Yahiro ended the call, and turned back towards the apartment door.

"Sorry, Saburō-san, it looks like I have to go out again."

"Heh, kids are always busy. Well, look out for the Slug..."

This time it was Togusa's phone that rang mid-sentence.

"Oops, sorry. ...Oh, it's them?"

Togusa said as he put his phone to his ear.

Thinking it would be bad to impose on Togusa's conversation, Yahiro bowed his head and made as to leave, but—

"Oh... Got it. I'll go now, then. ...Ah, Yahiro wait!"

Ending the call, Saburō called for Yahiro to stop.

"Are you heading towards Ikebukuro station?"

"Ah, yeah. 60 Storey Street."

"Great! That's just nice."

"?"

Yahiro tilted his head, and Saburō opened the van door, smiling.

"Some people I know just called. I'll be going there too, so hop on."



Dusk. Shinra's apartment.

While watching the 6 o'clock evening news, Celty confided in Shinra her doubts.

'I'm helping to search for the Slugger, sure, but I think it's best if the police nab the guy first.'

It would be in her favour should the police catch the criminal first.

Yumasaki and Karisawa's commission would go unfinished, but if the police were the ones to catch the Slugger they were unlikely to complain. This applied likewise to Shizuo.

There was the slim possibility that Shizuo would storm into the detention centre bare-handed, but it seemed that Shizuo was deeply indebted to the police, so Celty felt that he would not go that far.

Therefore the most peaceful solution would be for the police to catch the culprit and wrap up the case.

She had spoken to Shinra with these hopes, but—

"Yeah, of course. It might take a little more time, though?"

"Why? Can't they just track down people who bought those pajamas?"

"...Well, the mascot pajamas..."

'What about it?'

Celty asked, puzzled. Shinra sighed deeply.

"It's a trend right now in Ikebukuro. So there could be hundreds of people who own it, I think?"

'...Huh?'

"It started off as a pajama set sold as fan merchandise, but when word about the Slugger spread online, and people began to worry the company would stop selling it, a huge number of people went to buy it... Furthermore, once stores started announcing they would stop selling for prudence's sake, all those who bought and hoarded the pajamas popped out online and resold a large number. Hahaha."

'W-w-wha...'

Celty's knees went weak at this information, but Shinra was not done yet:

"On top of that, right now there are people online being thick and thinking wearing that will give them attention, so even if the police think they've found the Slugger, it could just be a middle or high schooler wearing the same pajamas... It's happened a number of times already."

Those people should just be ar'

Arrested, she was about to type, but just then she stopped herself.

—I'm not one who should be saying that, huh.

Remembering the image of the traffic police squad chasing after her, she shuddered.

'...These people have way too much time...'

"Yep. An online troublemaking group seems to be at the centre of it. They call themselves Underrars."

'Underrars?'

Celty felt odd at this familiar name.

"Yep. The Dollars are gone, right? The kids who couldn't accept that reality banded together to make another anonymous online group to replace it. They spray graffiti along roads saying it's guerilla art, or plant radishes on unoccupied space in the city; a willful bunch."

'I never knew.'

"It's probably a portmanteau of Dollars and Under. Under Rars. I wonder what Rars means?"

'Plan.'

"Huh?"

At the text Celty showed him, Shinra cocked his head.

'In Icelandic. It means a plan, or advice, along those lines.'

(*The 'rars' is the Icelandic word 'ráð'. According to Anni-fiesta, it is a reference to the valkyrie Ráðgríðr.)

"Oh I see! Amazing as always, Celty! You even know Nordic languages!"

'Well, a very, very old friend of mine had that as a nickname, so... Anyway that's not important right now. We're talking about the Slugger."

Celty changed the topic casually, making a sigh-like gesture.

'OK, so the clothes are one thing, but there's no excuse for having a hammer, right?"

"Actually. Isn't it something you can hide easily? Since you just need to attach something hard and heavy to a rod and wrap it up with bandages. You could even use a pestle and any rock on the street."

'...Uuu, finding the culprit might be harsher than I thought..."

"It'd be a snap if you could catch the person in the act. I'll be bait if it comes to it, Celty."

Shinra said carelessly. Celty pressed a finger onto his forehead.

'How would you attract the criminal? Anyway, even if you could, don't do dangerous things."

"Even if you're doing dangerous things? You're being selfish."

'Yeah, I am. This is my selfishness. Is it bad?'

"It's not bad. But I might be selfish in return, you know?"

Shinra said with the smile of a mischievous child, before he clapped his hands.

"Right! It might take time, but there's a way we can be sure to catch the criminal!"

'Really?'

"Yeah, first I need to use Saika on the people of Ikebukuro and..."

'Rejected.'

Celty rejected him without listening him out, and continued to think.

Just then, her phone rang.

'Speak of the devil, it's the boss.'

"Yumasaki-kun and friends?"

'They're the client, right? The boss is... the boy I talked about before, Kotonami.'

Celty said, checking her mail.

And there, written in a nonchalant tone, was:

[We will be capturing the Slugger tonight. Please come outside my apartment.]

♂♀

Night time. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

Shirobishi Yōko was panicking.

Everything had gone well.

She had even found the perfect target.

So how had things come to this?

While Yōko remained in this turmoil, the voice of a young man reached her ears.

"Fuffuffu, I never thought I would be targeted... So I really am a hero chosen to be guided through a 2D-esque destiny...! Soon I'll get in a traffic accident and be reborn in a different world!"

Standing before her was a slit-eyed young man, holding a fire extinguisher that spouted fire.

As she looked on the young man spouting all of these strange words, Yōko merely continued to think.

About just how she had ended up in this situation.

♂♀

10 minutes ago.

What Yōko's eyes saw as she combed Ikebukuro for the day's sacrifice was the one thing she loathed most at this point.

'Owl of the Peeping Dead'

The wave of evil that had started all this remained rampant in the city even now.

The outbreak of assault incidents had stemmed it somewhat, but still the live action film's Revival sequel was being screened, and posters decorated the streets.

—How can everyone still laugh when all this has happened?

Feeling the world unfair, Yōko reaffirmed her resolve to correct that problem.

She began to glare at her surroundings as she walked on the street.

So as to find a new sacrifice.

Being the last night of Golden Week, it was less crowded than the day before; chances were people were preparing to work the next day.

Until now she had attacked indiscriminately, going for the easy targets.

But had that been wrong?

Should she act with a specific target?

Thinking this, she murmured with determination,

"Yes, that's it... That's it... That's why I've always been overtaken by that false Samaritan."

She labelled the other Slugger a false Samaritan in her mind, her eyes clouding over with hate.

Those eyes caught on to an atypical sight on the street.

There was a van parked in a car park.

Some manga illustration decorated one of its side doors.

—Ahh, disgusting. Printing a manga design on the car, what are they thinking?

She had evolved from despising not only OPD but the entirety of anime; with hateful eyes she glowered at the group surrounding the van.

One of them, a young man with narrow eyes, was holding an OPD fan while talking excitedly.

—Ahh, even here there is trash!

Moving closer, she could hear him delivering an impassioned speech.

"Anyway! We need to tell people OPD isn't at fault! The Slugger's definitely an OPD hater! They're just trying to ruin OPD's image!"

Yōko felt as if she had been punched in the stomach.

The man's point had in all truth hit the mark. She felt as if her true identity had been exposed.

Her head spun.

She could not believe that there could still be a man believing OPD was 'not at fault' in this situation.

—I never imagined there to be such fools in Ikebukuro.

In her heart, Yōko had long condemned OPD to be at fault.

Was there anything else so harmful?

Owl of the Peeping Dead.

Was it not the existence of such a thing that had brought her to lose herself in assaulting others?

—How could the thing that turned me into the Slugger have no blame!

It was possible her mind had no logic at the moment.

But her brain still operated sufficiently as a system to achieve a single objective.

She had chosen.

The victim of the Slugger that would become tonight's sacrifice.

And she went on to justify herself with cyclical logic.

It was not punishment, but salvation.

Those eyes captured by evil things would be awakened by the blow she struck.

Those foolish worshippers of evil would come to know.

What kind of tragedy awaited those fallen to their path.

With this everyone would be saved; saved.

So she, at least, believed.

It contradicted her thoughts from merely seconds earlier, but it was still adherent to her goal.

She targeted the silt-eyed man.

Peeking from a distance through the gaps—it appeared he had just bade farewell to his friends, and after only a few minutes' wait he parted from his friends and headed away from the downtown.

—Ahh, things are moving in my favour.

—This is proof I'm doing the right thing.

—I knew it, I should have chosen my sacrifices!

Synchronising with the other Slugger in the delusion that the world was her ally—she watched the man's movements, waiting intently for her chance.

And setting her mind on an unpopulated location, she made her preparations.

The man seemed to have just received a call, for he took out his phone and began speaking to someone.

Yōko saw it as her chance.

She removed the clothes she had worn over her suit, revealing a different material.

In seconds she was clad in the Dark Owl costume she had worn beneath, and walking towards the man's back.

At first, slowly.

And then faster and faster.

Suppressing her breathing so as to be silent, she took out the bandage-wrapped hammer she had hidden in her bosom, and swung it hard.

But in the next moment—

“—Watch out!”

A yell from afar shifted the attention of the slit-eyed man to behind him.

“What?”

Where holding his phone, turning around obviously—head-on he met the eyes of Yōko, who had the hammer raised.

“...”

“...”

“Die!!”

After an instant of blankness, Yōko, panicking, brought her hammer down hard.

“Owaa?!”

The slit-eyed man dodged by a hairsbreadth, and fell on his backside on the road.

—I can do it!

A glance behind told her that there were two figures running this way, but there was still time before they made it. The distance was sufficient that she could injure the man and escape.

No; it did not matter even if she could not escape.

She had to sacrifice the scum who worshipped that vile owl.

Even if she were caught, the police and court, and the public, should understand.

It was that vile owl's fault that she did this.

And so they would surely censor that series.

For that to happen, she had to offer one last sacrifice.

One last sacrifice, for the wholesome future of Ikebukuro.

Because she thoroughly believed this, without wavering, she brought her hammer down on the man still fallen on the road.

Without the time nor care to ensure it was non-fatal, it was a blow purely meant to immobilise him.

Yet—

Clang! With a loud sound, something blocked the hammer.

“?!”

When Yōko looked at her to-be victim in surprise, she saw that he had taken off his backpack in a flash, and had used it as a shield against the hammer.

The strangeness of his reaction filled Yōko with anxiety and shock.

She had not expected there would be a large metallic object in his backpack.

What happened in the next moment answered her questions, while generating even more.

“The Slugger...”

The slit-eyed man whispered this, and took something out of his backpack.

—...

—A fire... extinguisher...?

The appearance of this absolutely random object confused her.

And the very next moment—the fire extinguisher spewed fire.

♂♀

A few minutes before the fire extinguisher spewed fire.

The boy who shouted ‘Watch out!’ had been sitting in the back of Togusa’s van.

“But well... I never imagined you would know these guys.”

Togusa Saburō sighed deeply from the driver’s seat as he said this to Yahiro sitting in the back.

When he was about to let Yahiro off the van at the meeting point, Karisawa and Yumasaki had greeted the boy before Togusa, and so Togusa slowly came to realise that they were already acquainted.

—“Ehh?! Why’s Yahiro-kun coming down from Toguchi’s van?! Magic?!”^(K)

—“Sorcery... No, maybe it’s some type of mind-control superpower...!”^(Y)

—“Huh? You know Saburō-san?”

—“Not only that; we were going to introduce you, you know?”^(K)

—“I see, actually, I’ve been staying at Togusa-san’s apartment...”

—“Nonono! Wait! Guys, wait! What’s happening?!”

After that excitement, both sides had explained the situation, and Togusa had accepted it for now.

With a quick mutual introduction Karisawa and Yumasaki had chased Togusa out of his own van claiming, ‘We need to talk in secret,’ and started talking and laughing using the van as a makeshift conference room.

Despite being annoyed, Togusa had given up as this always happened, and had passed the time outside with another of his friends.

—Well, since it’s those two, it’s probably otaku stuff.

—Now I think of it, he does look like a manga type. He might even be into dōjinshi or cosplay.

—Ahh, but I never thought he’d catch the attention of Karisawa and Yumasaki.

Just being aware of the duo’s more dangerous side made Togusa feel torn.

Even so, within the bounds of their hobby they were well-behaved, and furthermore they were veterans of the lifestyle.

—It’s not like I can ask him to cut ties with them.

—But if anything happens, what do I say to my family...?

After being immersed in those thoughts for tens of minutes, he found that the trio had exited the van, perhaps having concluded their business.

Karisawa headed home through Tokyu Hands, while Yumasaki made his way on foot.

—Well, apparently there are a lot of people who do dōjinshi and keep it secret from their family.

—Maybe I shouldn’t ask too much.

Driving the van out of the parking lot, Saburō said to Yahiro in the back,

“I don’t know how you know Yumasaki and Karisawa, and I’m not going to ask, but... Well, choose your friends wisely.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’re trustworthy now. I’m not a good judge of character, but I felt relieved knowing they’re your friends, Saburō-san.”

"Wait, that's..."

While Saburō remained at a loss for words, the man in the passenger seat laughed.

"Hah... That's touché for you, Togusa."

"No, but..."

The man with the bandana had already been introduced.

However, Karisawa and Yumasaki had brought Yahiro aside immediately after, so they had not talked yet.

Perhaps sympathising with Yahiro's awkwardness as to how to interact, Kadota turned around and said,

"I'll introduce myself again. I'm Kadota. This guy and I ended up stuck together over the years. I go to your apartment now and then."

"Ah, okay. I'm Mizuchi Yahiro. Nice to meet you."

"Mizuchi, that's a strange name. Where are you from?"

"Akita."

"Whoa, that's a long way."

Just then Saburō, who was in the driver's seat, told Kadota, smiling,

"Listen, this kid, right after he came to Ikebukuro he got beaten up by Shizuo, you know?"

"Huh? Seriously?"

"Yes."

Yahiro nodded honestly, and Kadota's eyes widened.

"How did you piss him off?"

"Um... It was my fault. My friend from my class happened to make him angry... I tried to stop him, and then it turned into a fight."

"I see, so that's what happened."

Kadota found it odd that Yahiro had used the word 'fight', but putting it aside,

gave his advice as a more experienced resident of Ikebukuro.

"Well, he might have a short fuse, but he's not unreasonable. If you apologise properly he'll forgive you."

"Yes, that's what Saburō-san said too. I'll say sorry when I meet him again."

"Yeah, that's the important part."

There, Saburō smiled wryly, and continued,

"And you know what, after getting beat up by Shizuo he just stood up and walked home, and then the next day he went to school like normal. This kid's really something, isn't he?"

"That's... actually impressive."

Kadota glanced at his face disbelievingly, and Yahiro said honestly,

"No, it was just coincidence. I, um, ended up at a convenient spot..."

Yahiro had simply described from his own perspective, but Kadota, perhaps not expecting the quiet boy to be physically sturdy, tilted his head and mumbled,

"Speaking of which... Well, they say Shizuo's toned down recently, but still..."

With that, Kadota tried to continue a casual conversation with Yahiro—

But seeing Yahiro looking outside the van anxiously as they spoke, he asked,

"What's wrong? Did you forget something?"

"No..."

Yahiro went quiet for awhile, before he took in the surroundings once more, and said,

"Um... Which way is Yumasaki-san's house?"

"Hm? He stays in the middle of the residential area north of here... Why?"

"Will there be other people on the streets?"

"It's a housing district, so at this time... Hm."

The clockhand had already passed 10.

Away from the downtown area, it ought to be fairly deserted at this time.

“Could you let me off the van? And please teach me the way to Yumasaki-san’s house?”

“? Oi, what’s going on? You still have school tomorrow, remember? You shouldn’t stay out late.”

Saburō said this in worry for his tenant’s school life, but Yahiro replied, anxiously,

“I hope it’s a mistake, but...”

As if out of time, Yahiro cried out,

“Someone might be after Yumasaki-san or Karisawa-san.”

“Huh?”

Saburō hesitated. Yahiro took out something black from his bag, and bowed his head with a grave expression.

“Please, I’ll explain later, please let me down. And call Yumasaki-san to ask him to be careful, if possible... Since now I think of it, I only exchanged numbers with Karisawa-san.”

“No, you can’t just...”

Beside an increasingly perplexed Togusa, Kadota, seeing how serious Yahiro’s eyes were, said,

“Oi, stop at the end of this road.”

“Oi, seriously?”

“I know his address. If we go from here, it’s faster to run than take a U-turn.”

Kadota removed his seatbelt, and stated to Yahiro,

“I’ll lead the way. Follow me.”

♂♀

And so things led to the present.

Yōko, feeling part of her suit burn, began to strip it off hurriedly.

Gripping her hammer, under her full-face hood she was in cold sweat.

—What is this?

—What is going on!

Meanwhile, Yumasaki as well was sweating from his palms.

He had never actually thought he would be targeted by the Slugger.

He had come to carry this fire extinguisher-turned-flamethrower around since back when he had been searching for the culprit of Kadota's hit-and-run.

In the past few days, he had often fantasised about being attacked by the Slugger, and when he was alone in the streets he would often be formulating counterstrategies.

It was the same way he had in his school days fantasised about what would be the coolest way to fight back if a terrorist were to attack the classroom at that moment—

But unlike back then, when the terrorist had never appeared, now his fantasy had come true.

If a terrorist or the Slugger really appeared before a normal person, they would probably be unable to move as they had fantasised, and be frozen in fear.

But Yumasaki was just a little abnormal.

It was as simple as that.

On one hand, the rumoured Slugger, wielding a hammer.

On the other, the young man chattering strangely, wielding a flamethrower in the guise of a fire extinguisher.

The fact that not one but both of them could be arrested meant nothing to Yumasaki.

He even felt he wouldn't mind being charged with excessive self-defence or other crimes if he could stop the Slugger's attacks once and for all. 'I'm not an OPD fan, I prefer news programmes with shocking footage instead of manga,' Yumasaki reminded himself to say in his testimony, and he gave the lever a gentle squeeze.

Flames spurted forth.

The Slugger flailed and retreated, but Yumasaki yelled,

“Now, surrender yourself! Pass the rope, please!”

“What... What are you saying! I’m not afraid of you!”

The fact that the Slugger’s voice was feminine stunned Yumasaki for a second, but deeming this unimportant, he aimed the nozzle of the fire extinguisher and said,

“Being scared would be an insult! No one said I can’t use a flamethrower to level up my strength!”

At Yumasaki’s yelling, the Slugger became hysterical, screaming,

“I don’t understand anything you’re saying! You freak!”

“You’re one to speak! Turn yourself in peacefully and have a taste of what it’s like to look like the zombies you look down on!”

“What do you want! You freak!”

“I’ll be the one asking the questions later, very thoroughly!”

In the duration of their exchange, Yumasaki had caught sight of two human figures running their way.

He could not make out their faces for the distance, but from their dressing it was probably Yahiro and Kadota.

Yahiro was ahead of Kadota, and Yumasaki shouted to him,

“Yahi... It’s dangerous, stay back!”

Yumasaki almost said Yahiro’s name in front of the Slugger, barely managing to stop himself.

He had heard of Yahiro’s true prowess, but it was unthinkable to ask a high schooler to fight the Slugger with him, especially when it seemed he could somehow manage the situation by himself.

With this in mind, Yumasaki planned to disarm his opponent and have Kadota restrain her—

But the words of the boy running towards him threw a wrench in those workings.

“Watch out! **Behind! Behind you!**”

“Huh?”

Sensing the unusual urgency in the boy’s voice, Yumasaki turned around, keeping the nozzle of the fire extinguisher pointed at the Slugger.

And there he saw a figure clad in Dark Owl mascot pajamas—

Raising its hammer high to strike him down.

♂♀

At the same time. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

Ajimura Shōya was taking his time following his ‘target’.

It was a delinquent boy, walking along a deserted road without any alertness whatsoever.

—Walking alone at night when the Slugger hasn’t been caught?

—Delinquents really have no brains.

Scoffing, Ajimura slowly moved closer.

There was a specific reason he had chosen to target that boy.

When the boy had banged into Ajimura in the street, he had complained unapologetically, ‘Ow, don’t get your smelly sweat on me, dumbass.’

The delinquent boy had made this irrational complaint despite being the one at fault, glaring down at Ajimura.

While Ajimura had been angry at this boy a full generation younger, he had been grateful.

Was this not a gift from heaven?

Was this not a sacrifice sent by the city itself?

To think such a suitable candidate would show up here; one he would have no weight on his conscience punishing.

His plan had been to target more famous delinquents, but it was best to lay

low for now.

After all, he had only recently bungled the attack on Heiwajima Shizuo's friend.

After tailing the boy carefully, oh so carefully, he finally arrived at a location suited for his 'fan activity' of assault.

It was far from the downtown. Ajimura watched the boy loiter in a nearby park, and slowly hid himself in the shadows.

The open gate of an apartment. A narrow alley. Behind a pile of scrap.

It would have been impossible to get this close in the busy street in front of the station and still be able to change clothes, but here, in a quiet residential district, it was another story altogether.

Ajimura had worn his mascot pajamas in preparation.

However, the hood was off, tucked into the jumper he wore over it, and only the black pants were exposed.

As his lower half was covered in only black cloth, it would be hard to distinguish the pants from regular track pants. It would be impossible right now in the night time.

Ajimura was able to finish changing just by removing the jumper, and he stuffed the jumper into the pajamas, making his stomach appear bloated.

With that he put on the hood. In the dark, Ajimura had transformed into Dark Owl in the span of seconds.

After checking that the surroundings were deserted, he closed in secretly on the delinquent boy.

It was as always.

With no hesitation.

He had to make up for the damage he had failed to deal on Heiwajima Shizuo's friend.

With these unreasonable thoughts, Ajimura tightened his grip on the hammer.

—This is it. This is the feeling.

—Ecstasy throughout my body. Like I'm not myself anymore.

—No, that's not it, this is the real me.

—Dark Owl. I am the true Dark Owl.

One step after another, suppressing all noise, he closed in.

—Yes, I have people on my side.

Ajimura saw a Dark Owl standing beside the delinquent, and nodded vehemently.

—I have comrades that will come to... help me...

The Dark Owl was staring at him.

—That will?Th-th-th-th-that? ? ? ??????? ?? ?

A Dark Owl that was not himself stood before his eyes.

Ajimura was bewildered.

—W, wh-wh-wh-, who, is this?

—The real thing! Or the, real, the real Slugger?!

—Or, an, an ally? My ally? Which is it, w, which-ch-ch-ch-ch?

Ajimura's voice had begun to stutter even in his thoughts. Sweat broke out over his whole body, seeping into the entire suit.

While he was experiencing this psychological shock, the 'Other Dark Owl' raised its hammer high in the air—

And swung it down on the delinquent boy.

After a frozen instant, the boy crumbled bonelessly to the ground.

And so Ajimura came to believe.

That the being before him was his comrade in executing justice.

That the world was truly being born anew for him.



Ikebukuro Station. Before the east entrance.

"Are you okay, Horada-san? Didn't you say you'd only be discharged next week?"

"Shut up, don't underestimate my recovery speed."

Horada, wrapped in bandages head to toe, hobbled along the street.

His juniors accompanying him exchanged uneasy glances.

In truth he was in no condition to walk, but predicting that Izumii would visit again if he remained in the hospital, he had forcibly discharged himself, half-threatening the doctors.

Thinking on it now the police would find his behaviour suspicious, but still this was preferable to living in constant fear Izumii would hit him with a hammer in his sleep.

With this in mind, Horada had felt it necessary to search for the Slugger personally as well, bringing his juniors along to march around Ikebukuro.

"But Horada-san, I doubt the Slugger will show up right in front of the station."

"How sure are you? The Slasher attacked people right next to the station, back then."

"That's true, but the Slugger attacks have happened in Shinjuku, Setagaya, other places; not just around Ikebukuro. I don't think we'll find anything just marching around here."

His juniors, who had been walking around with him for half a day already, were beginning to complain.

—Kuh... These guys...

—It feels like they've been looking down on me since Shizuo beat me up...

The fear from the time Shizuo had beaten him half-dead reawakened, causing the wounds from the Sluggers to sting.

The juniors, unaware of Horada's self-punishment, looked at him doubtfully.

"Were there really more than five Sluggers, anyway?"

"What the hell? Are you saying I fucking lied?! Huh?"

He attempted to threaten, but the wounds throughout his body made him wobbly, and he was not intimidating in the least.

"But to have so many people would catch too much attention, right? If they had to change clothes secretly it must have been one or two at most..."

The man suddenly stopped, staring at the crowd on the street with his face stunned.

"? Oi, what's wrong?"

He furrowed his brow and asked, turning to look himself.

There, he saw 'black'.

In front of the station on this night:

Illuminated by the streetlights, a black silhouette stood in the middle of the street.

The instant he saw it, the blood drained from Horada's face.

"Wh... Wha... How..."

Dark Owl.

The Slugger that had knocked him down with the hammer now stood before his eyes.

Night as it was, there was a fair crowd before Ikebukuro Station, since the trains were still running at this time.

The people glanced oddly at the Dark Owl, but believing it impossible for the Slugger to show up so brazenly in front of the station, they assumed it was a prank or an OPD publicity event, and simply walked past.

And there was one more reason they assumed it was a prank or a publicity event.

"I, i-i-i-i-, it's here! O, oi, protect me, you guys!"

Saying 'protect me' instead of 'go get them!' put him in a negative light, but—"B, but Horada-san, there... Look!"

When Horada looked at where his junior pointed—

“H, huh?!”

There was a Dark Owl there too.

“There’s one over there too!”

And another more.

“Th, there!”

And another.

Just counting those visible from the station there were easily more than five Dark Owls spread around.

—W... W-w-w-, what the hell?!

Just as Horada’s mind was in chaos, his junior said to him,

“Th, there really were many of them...! Sorry! Sorry, Horada-san!”

“Huh? Y, yeah. It’s fine so long as you know, it’s fine.”

It was more that his lie had been realised, but Horada would rather have done without a reality like this.

Along with this thought, Horada was struck by a deep sense of unease at the possibility that he had been embroiled into something truly grave.

“What do we do now Horada-san!”

“I don’t even know...”

After a few beats, he looked back to the road outside the station—

And noticing even more Dark Owls, he spun back quickly.

“Run!”

“Wait! Wait up, Horada-san!”

Horada escaped straight into the station, but being injured he could not run, and was overtaken by his juniors one by one.

“W, wait, guys! W... Don’t leave me behind!!!”

♂♀

Himeka’s room.

“What is this...”

Himeka had, after completing her preparations for school the next day, been browsing the internet for information on the Slugger, when she came upon a very strange exchange of information.

It was that a large number of Dark Owls were appearing in Ikebukuro right now.

Indeed, from the numerous phone camera uploads one could see many Dark Owls parading around the street in the night time.

As they did not seem particularly violent, the assumption was that it was a prank in bad taste, and netizens were in uproar.

“...”

Deciding to call Yahiro first, she took out her phone.

And pressed the call button for Yahiro from her call history, but—

‘The person you just called may have run out of battery or may be in a place without signal—’

“...”

With a sense of omen, Himeka looked out her window.

She gazed at the lights of Sunshine Building through the gaps between the buildings outside, and her fists curled loosely in worry of her friend.

“I hope... Yahiro-kun’s not in trouble.”

♂♀

Upper Ikebukuro. Alley.

Coincidentally, at this moment, Yahiro’s phone had become unable to take any calls.

It had been jolted violently and stopped functioning.

Because it was a smartphone to begin with, and not the heavy-duty type that could withstand strong impact, it was hard to tell if it would still work. But he had with Kuon’s help made a backup of his information with cloud storage, so probably he could recover everything without problems after it was repaired.

The repair fee would likely be expensive, but Yahiro did not have the luxury of

worrying about that.

For two Dark Owls were standing before his eyes, emanating a sense of danger.

At the cost of Yahiro's mobile phone, Yumasaki had managed to avoid the attack of the Slugger by a hairsbreadth.

A few seconds ago, just as the hammer came down towards his head—

Yahiro's mobile phone, thrown at high velocity, had struck the Slugger's hammer directly.

Even running he could not make it. Yahiro, thinking this, had simply flung the most flingable object in his hands—in other words, his mobile phone—with all his might.

Had it been luck or Yahiro's inborn skill that had allowed not even a ball but a mobile phone to hit its mark?

At any rate, as a result the mobile phone struck true, and with a jarring crash the hammer rebounded upwards from its downswing.

“...”

The two Sluggers slowly turned to watch Yahiro in shock—and tilted their heads disbelievingly.

Meanwhile Yumasaki, who had put distance between them and had been preparing his fire extinguisher, turned towards Yahiro—and widened his slit-eyes dramatically, yelling,

“...He transformed?!!”

As said, Yahiro was currently both Yahiro and not Yahiro.

He did not want the Sluggers to see his face.

Moreover, he did not want others to see his face while there was the possibility he would be utilising extreme violence against the Sluggers.

It was those cowardly thoughts, combined with the straightforward reasoning from his conversation with Li-pei that, ‘If a mysterious guy defeats the Slugger, the rumours that it’s a gang war can at least be put down,’ that had led him to

don what he usually carried around in his bag while running here.

A practically weightless, mystical black cloth.

The black coat Celty Sturluson had bequeathed him.

With matching black pants, Yahiro was now black from head to toe.

'Shadow Man' could be the most apt description.

In contrast to the Headless Rider's dark rider suit, shadows writhing like dry ice wrapped Yahiro's body.

A being far more unusual than the Sluggers.

The latest urban legend Snake Hands now manifested before the Sluggers—in this moment, in the district of Ikebukuro—as not myth but reality.

Though, since he had donned a mask of shadow because of his cowardice, it made a fairly odd scene on this residential street.

Two 'Dark Owls'.

The mysterious 'Snake Hands'.

And a regular civilian with a fire extinguisher that was in fact a flamethrower.

Upon his late arrival, Kadota furrowed his brow, and uttered the one sentence most fitting to this scene.

"...What the hell?"

♂♀

Underneath the almost comical appearance of this situation—

Sirens were going off throughout Yahiro's body.

—Could I have misunderstood?

The sense of foreboding overtook the whole of his body in an instant.

This was not simply a serial assault case.

At first he had thought a gang war would be the worst scenario.

But what if the real situation made even that theory seem naïve?

What if the assaults were deliberately planned?

What if the people standing before him were not simply random assaulters, but something else—what then?

The possibilities flashed through his mind, and a chill almost like pain lanced through every cell.

The reason was simple.

It was not because the situation was so eerie; having two serial assaulters running amuck.

It was not a matter of the Slugger at all.

The two Dark Owls.

The atmosphere they emitted made Yahirō shudder.

“Ah, AheeEEAAaaaah!!”

The Slugger who had attacked Yumasaki first let out a high-pitched scream, and began to move.

“Ah! Wait!”

Yumasaki tried to give chase—but before he could do so, the other Slugger blocked the way.

“Kuh! Cloning jutsu is nothing! I’ll dispel the fake!”

With this, Yumasaki squeezed the lever lightly.

The flamethrower had been built to spew flames as far as five to ten metres if he squeezed it properly, but even Yumasaki had the common sense to avoid setting fire to a residential area.

In the first place whipping out a fire extinguisher-turned-flamethrower in said residential district or even having made such a thing was less than commonsensical, but in this way Yumasaki’s mind had a screw cleanly missing.

The controlled flames shot towards the second Slugger.

But the Slugger crouched low, moving out of the fire’s range.

“?!”

The Dark Owl escaped the flames right before Yumasaki’s eyes.

The person had, with superhuman speed and reflexes, evaded the stream of fire easily, slipping up close to Yumasaki.

From Yumasaki's perspective, it was as if the Slugger had teleported.

—Could this be—

Before Yumasaki could finish his analogy to a technique from an anime or manga series, the Slugger launched an offense from beneath, granting him not even that time.

A lightning-quick uppercut.

If it connected he would surely be knocked out—

But just before it did, Yahiro kicked the arm from the side.

A hairsbreadth.

The kick diverted his arm, and the Slugger's uppercut missed and grazed Yumasaki's cheek.

—!

—I knew it!

The current series of events confirmed it.

The Dark Owl he was facing was a **ridiculously strong foe**.

Yahiro's kick had been to bodily topple his opponent.

But all he had been able to do was alter their arm's trajectory slightly.

His opponent had to have incredible balance, and strong lower half muscles.

Back when he had lived in Akita, Yahiro had been challenged by self-proclaimed martial artists—this felt similar to that time.

But although the style was similar, the scale was on a different level.

The self-proclaimed martial artists that had attacked him in his hometown had gone down quickly enough, but the Dark Owl in front of him seemed able to withstand any number of his kicks.

The warnings had been blaring in Yahiro's mind from earlier on.

It was akin to when he had faced off with Shizuo.

—It's scary.

—It's scary. Scary. Scaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaredscaredscaredscared
scared S C A R E D

—It's the same.

—The same as with Shizuo.

—Strong. Strongstrongstrong.

—**This person might be able to kill me.**

The instant he recognised this as fact, fear usurped his body.

Kill or be killed.

A feeling he had not experienced for a long time rose from the depth of his gut.

He had felt nothing this close to killing intent with Shizuo.

Shizuo's motive had clearly been anger, and it was justified.

The figure before him now had none of that.

He felt such terror it was as if naked blades had sprung at him from the ground.

One slip and it's over.

The identity of this Dark Owl did not matter.

“...Please stay back.”

As he told Yumasaki this, Yahiro began his next offense.

Yahiro's open hand thrust towards the Dark Owl's throat.

But the Dark Owl evaded with a limber backflip, and with that opened up several metres between them.

When dodging that flat-handed strike, the person's body had bent backwards more than 90 degrees.

Without coming back up, the stranger had transitioned into a backflip; faced

with this borderline-frightening flexibility and elasticity, Yahiro thought.

—Ahh, I want to run, I want to run.

The cowardly boy thought.

He wondered, after he ran away, how soundly he could sleep in his futon.

His face was masked.

His name was secret.

Safety was just around the corner.

—But if I run away now...

Yahiro gritted his teeth, and stepped forward.

—Yumasaki-san and Kadota-san...

—No, even if all of us escape... No one knows who the next victim will be. It could be someone important to me.

—Isn't that so, so much scarier?

Resolutely, he pulled himself together.

And he leapt.

Aiming to catch his opponent off guard, he kicked off the asphalt powerfully, accelerating his body.

Feeling his bodily fluids shift towards his back, Yahiro ran across the ground, and jumped diagonally.

He ran up the wall until he was full 3 metres in the air.

With that he leapt towards his opponent, attempting to kick their head like a football.

But the Dark Owl ducked a millisecond faster, dodging the kick.

Yahiro's shoe brushed the top of the hood , and singed, fine threads danced through the air.

Without pause, Yahiro kicked the wall on the other side, and flew towards the Dark Owl.

A flurry of fists.

Faced with the vicious assault of elbows and kicks, his opponent's stance fell apart countless times.

But each time the stranger would hold their ground wherever they ended up, and begin a counter-assault against Yahiro with fluid motions.

Yahiro's experience-honed intuition and trained reflexes told him their stalemate was a precarious one.

If he was distracted for just one instant, he would be knocked out or worse.

The last time he had expended so much effort was in the fight with Shizuo recently.

Yet the physical strength of the Dark Owl in front of him was not at Shizuo's level.

Instead, inborn or through martial arts experience, he had atypically sharp instincts and judgment, which he used to block or evade the series of attacks while sending out his own.

—Think. Thinkthinkthink.

—He isn't as strong as Shizuo-san, but **this is close!**

The assault felt truly life-threatening.

Even worse, his opponent still had the hammer in one hand. Just one blow connecting could be lethal.

—I have to stop him from moving.

In the face of this offence, Yahiro felt strangely calm.

—I have to stop his legs.

—I have to stop his arms.

—I have to stop his thoughts.

—I have to stop his senses.

—I have to stop his breathing.

—I have to stop his •••••.

Time slowed.

—I have to stop his •••••.

It was a feeling he had never experienced fighting the delinquents in Akita.

—I have to stop his •••••.

—I have to stop, his heart.

Through the repetition of attacks—for a single moment, hostility bled into true killing intent.

For that moment, Yahiro's attack grew sharper, and he landed a single hit on his opponent's face.

The hood fell back partway, revealing the mouth of his opponent.

It appeared it was a young man. With blood running from his mouth, the man was smiling.

—Huh?

There, Yahiro thought.

About what expression he was making right then.

—I wonder why?

—Even when I'm so scared.

—Even though I could die...

Unable to organise his emotions, there was only one thing Yahiro could grasp; the expression he was currently wearing.

—...I'm, smiling?

♂ ♀

At the same time. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

“Y, you did it! Hey you did it!”

Ajimura kicked the fallen delinquent, as he called to the ‘Other Dark Owl’ gleefully.

“Ha, haha! Hahah! Well done, well done!”

“...”

Although that Dark Owl only continued to stare at him silently, Ajimura continued, unfazed.

“It, it was you who helped me beat up Horada recently, right?! Hey! Thanks for that! That bastard tried to hit me even though he was scum!”

“...”

The ‘Other’ remained silent, holding its own hammer, and there Ajimura began to feel a chill.

“O, oi, say something.”

“...”

Rather than answering, the ‘Other’ started striding towards him slowly.

“...Y, you’re kidding. You’re not going after me too, right? Stop kidding around!”

“...”

Still there was no answer.

Ajimura took one step back, and then another, leaving the delinquent behind him.

“W, wait! Please wait? You’re my ally, right?”

“...”

“...! I am you! You are me! We’re both Dark Owl, right?! OPD is about our destiny, right? Hey! We’re fellow fans, let’s settle this nicely!”

“...”

Still not replying, the Dark Owl slowly, slowly closed the distance between them.

Almost as if a zombie from Owl of the Peeping Dead itself.

“Aah, AaaAAAAaaAA!”

In the moment he saw the image of the zombie superimposed on the figure, Ajimura succumbed to the pressure, and swung his own hammer at its head.

With a squelch, part of the hood that formed Dark Owl's head warped and collapsed on itself.

"Hiih?!"

The hammer had sunk in deeper than expected; Ajimura shuddered fearfully and fell on his backside.

As he shook violently he looked up at the 'Other', who had stopped moving.

He had definitely felt the head sinking in.

It was like nothing he had felt before, but seeing how deep the hammer had gone, it was hardly possible to survive.

"Ahhhhh, I, I did nothing wrong. It's your fault, you were the one who scared me. Right?... Ri, right, right, ria... AAAAaaaaaaaaAAAAA?!"

The man's bewildered plea turned into a shriek of terror.

For the 'Other', half of whose head had been crushed, was slowly beginning to move regardless.

The 'Other' took out a smartphone, and after typing something slowly, showed Ajimura the screen.

'Sorry.'

"...H, huah?!"

'I'm not very familiar with Owl of the Peeping Dead. Though I'm planning to see the live action soon.'

At the sight of the 'Other' typing effortlessly even after having its head crushed, Ajimura gaped in bewilderment.

The 'Other' before him removed its Dark Owl hood, letting it fall back.

And so Ajimura discovered.

The reason the being was still moving after its head was crushed.

The fact that it had no head to begin with at all.

Shuddering uncontrollably, Ajimura uttered its name:

"The... He-he-he... Headless... Rider!!"

'This is my answer to your question.'

As the Headless Rider displayed these words, the hammer it held morphed.

The bandages snapped off, and the hammer inside swelled to twice the original size, transforming into a pitch-black squeaky hammer toy.

Then, with a blow ten times stronger than the one she had given her cohabiter, she bashed it ruthlessly into Ajimura's cheek—

But Ajimura, having lost conscious while he was sent flying, had no way to know of her previous experiences.



Celty Sturluson was no human.

Known as a dullahan, she was a type of fae that originated from Scotland and Ireland—a being that called on the homes of those soon to breathe their last to inform them of their imminent deaths.

With her own severed head under her arm, riding a two-wheeled carriage drawn by a headless horse—known as the cóiste bodhar—she would visit the homes of those nearing death. If one were to carelessly open their door, they would be drenched with a full basin of blood—similar to the banshee, as a harbinger of misfortune, the dullahan was a subject of European folklore passed down the generations.

And on this night, she wore a slightly different face.

She was clad in mascot pajamas, in the dress of the serial assaulter known as Dark Owl.



A few minutes later.

'...Honestly. I never thought I'd be dragged into a charade like this.'

In a corner of the park.

After checking that no one was around, Celty said this to the delinquent boy beside her—Kuon.

The unconscious Slugger was now bound arm and leg by Celty's shadows, and lying on the ground just as Kuon had been before.

In short, Kuon had been bait.

The plan had been to lure Ajimura to a deserted location and have Celty finish him off wearing the same costume, and it had been executed seamlessly.

Kuon, who had pretended to fall from Celty's blow, now said to her energetically,

"I must say, that was perfect, thank you! But he found out you were the Headless Rider in the end; is that really okay?"

Kuon had called Celty having tracked down the Slugger, and when she arrived at their meeting point he had passed her a Dark Owl mascot pajama set.

—"See, if the Headless Rider beats up the Slugger for no reason, won't the Slugger want revenge?"

—"Plus, if one Dark Owl nabs another Dark Owl... Dark Owl's image will be restored, right?"

Although she did not believe things would turn out so perfectly, Kuon was after all her employer, and so she had abided by his wishes.

Since, in the end, it was trivial compared to getting to stop the Slugger.

As a result, even though she was exposed to the Slugger to be the Headless Rider, Celty was not particularly bothered.

'Well, it's all right. I'm used to being hated by people like that.'

"I see, that must be hard."

'Shouldn't you be the one bothered by this?'

"Huh?"

Kuon feigned ignorance, to which Celty pointed out calmly,

'You specially prepared a Dark Owl suit for this. Didn't you want to film something like, 'Dark Owl nabs Dark Owl!' and earn some profit?'

"...Dang. Where would I have filmed that from...?"

'The pen in your breast pocket's a digital video camera, right? It's popular these days. Even I was impressed, thinking the spy movies I watched had come to life; I bought a few along with the glasses-type myself.'

Kuon was about to ask, in jest, just what the Headless Rider would be doing with camera-equipped glasses, but judging that the atmosphere was inappropriate—he answered honestly.

“Damn. Yes, I have lots of hidden cameras, and I hired people to keep other people out, and I have a cell phone camera filming this secretly from afar.”

‘Don’t give me attitude.’

“...Are you angry?”

‘I’m not angry, but let me warn you, it’s not something you should be proud of.’

Celty slumped her shoulders in a gesture like a sigh, and gave the young man a warning.

‘You shouldn’t underestimate people. Anyone can see through a scheme like that. You’re free to use me to make profit, but don’t spread videos that expose my identity or make people think I’m a kidnapper.’

“...I’ll edit out the part where the head was crushed, then.”

‘How are you still thinking about that?!’

“It’s going to make money, come on?”

Kuon said unapologetically, and seeing this, Celty was able to grasp just what kind of a person he was.

‘It’s fine to use other people. Humans are creatures that live on by using one another; that’s what I think. But don’t think you’re the only one using others. There was a man who tried to achieve that position in the past, but that takes a special type of person, and it’s not something that people will like you for.’

“...Do you mean Orihara Izaya?”

‘You know him?’

Celty startled slightly.

More than the fact that he knew Izaya, she was surprised by the fact that Kuon’s smile had evaporated the instant he spoke the name, his eyes brimming with a bottomless iciness.

“Some things happened in the past...”

‘Then you should understand, right? His footsteps aren’t to be followed.’

“I know he’s a scoundrel, and he’s the one person I hate the most.”

Kuon ground his teeth hard, before making a pained expression for some reason, and spat,

“...It’s just that... there are people he saved exactly because he was a person like that.”

Seeing his expression, Celty went silent for a time.

In the end, perhaps deciding it would be best not to pry, she changed the topic, typing,

‘I see. I won’t probe, but I’ve warned you. ...In the first place, that wasn’t my question.’

“...What was it?”

‘How did you know this person was the criminal?’

◦ Celty’s biggest question was regarding just one fact—how Kuon had known the man was the criminal. If he had not known, the trap or any other strategy would have been useless.

“It wasn’t me, it was Nee-chan.”

‘What do you mean?’

Seeing what Celty had typed, Kuon explained somewhat embarrassedly regarding the family business.

“There was a user weirdly enthusiastic about the assault case on Nee-chan’s forums, saying Dark Owl was a good guy cleaning up the streets. He would agree with himself under other handles, or re-post the same thing everywhere. Nee-chan traced the IP address.”

‘And it was Ajimura?’

“Yeah. Nee-chan runs a few OPD information sites too. Apparently it was the same IP as the admin of a notorious self-proclaimed fansite who had been visiting her sites. Looking into it it turned out he’d been emphasising how bad

that Horada person was even before the police publicised the attack.”

‘So it was just a brainless guy all this time.’

Celty said frankly. Kuon smiled wryly, and nodded.

“Well now we know all that it seems that’s it. In the first place assaulting strangers isn’t something intelligent people do, huh?”

Kuon said wryly. Celty asked further,

‘Is that all?’

“...All of?”

‘If that was everything, I think you’d be helping the culprit along or make Yahiro-kun handle it.’

It was hard to tell in the form of text, but Kuon sensed that she was being cynical.

“What are you trying to say, Celty-san?”

‘Something beyond you... or your sister’s expectations happened, right?’

“Beyond our expectations... We caught the Slugger, so not really. Though I must say I didn’t expect the criminal to be someone who’d shown up on Nee-chan’s websites.”

Kuon began to ramble on about his miscellaneous thoughts, but as though to stop him, Celty asked a single question:

‘Just now, when the guy said thanks to me while I was wearing the Dark Owl costume... What was that about?’

“That... I’d like to know myself. Well, chances are the rumours are true that there are copycat Sluggers. Whether or not he’s a copycat doesn’t change the fact that he’s one of the culprits.”

Kuon said this, and stepped on Ajimura’s back with a foot.

“Well, all I can do is pass this guy to Karisawa-and Yumasaki-san.”

Chuckling, Kuon took out his phone—and dialed Karisawa’s number.

Almost as if to run away from Celty’s questions.

“...Ah, hello, Karisawa-san? It’s Kotonami.”

‘Oh?! Kuocchi?! What’s wrong? Did you say you were busy today?’

“I finished what I was doing. ...I just went with Celty-san and nabbed the Slugger.”

‘What?!’

“I want to pass him over, so, could you ask that driver you’re always with... uh... I don’t know his name, but could you ask him to drive his van over?”

‘Ah, um... That’s fine, but... What’s going on?’

“? What do you mean?”

‘No, I was with Togucchi awhile ago, but...’

The sound of footsteps and breathing peppered the call, as though she was running while on the phone.

‘Togucchi and Dotachin just called me, they said Yappi... Mizuchi-kun is fighting the Slugger...’

“...Huh?”

The call ended without any clarification, and seconds later, another number was calling.

“...Tatsugami-san?”

Though bewildered by the timing, Kuon accepted the call.

“...Hello.”

‘Ah, Kotonami-kun? The commotion online... are you seeing it?’

“Commotion online?”

‘They say a whole lot of Dark Owls are showing up in the city...’

“...Huh?!”

A few minutes later—

As Kuon’s eyes roved over the internet for information, Celty put her smartphone.

‘What happened? Another surprise?’

"...Nothing happened."

Kuon gave a forced smile, to which Celty typed,

"It's difficult to make people act in ways you expect. Izaya never controlled others. He appeared in control only because he accepted and loved any result. ...Well, just know he was a pest."

Despite saying he was a pest, Celty was strangely calm as she typed.

Glaring at her, Kuon said—

"Don't act as if you know any..."

After cutting off, he looked away unhappily.

"No... Maybe it's as you say..."

Kuon went silent, and continued to comb the web for information.

Celty made no move to blame or comfort him further.

She knew that saying anything more would be 'acting as if she knew'.

Aware that the only thing she knew was in fact Orihara Izaya's past, and not this boy's present.

♂ ♀

Upper Ikebukuro

"..."

By the time Karisawa and Saburō arrived, the fight had reached a standstill.

For some time the two had sparred back and forth, neither having an edge over the other; but now they separated and watched one another over the distance between them.

Yumasaki took it as a chance and raised the nozzle of his fire extinguisher, but Kadota stopped his hand.

"Dumbass, if you make him dodge again, it'll only disadvantage Yahiro."

Kadota whispered. Yumasaki accepted his point, and lowered the fire extinguisher.

Saburō, who had come behind them, saw the Yahiro-like figure and asked,

“O, oi, what’s happening! ...? What’s that? Why’s he wearing that black mask... Wait, isn’t that Celty’s shadow...?”

“Hero transformation?! Incredible! If this were SFX those moving shadows would be high-level!”

“No, wait Karisawa, pull yourself together. You’re not making sense...”

Alongside Karisawa’s voice, Saburō heard a different sound.

It was a familiar siren.

“Ah, it’s the cops.”

Perhaps the nearby residents had heard the commotion and seen what was going on through their windows, but in any case it was clear that police cars were headed their way.

The Dark Owl, who had heard it as well, gazed regretfully at Yahiro—

And after a few seconds, he grinned through the hole in his torn hood, and left.

“Ah?! He escaped?! ”

Yumasaki aimed his fire extinguisher hurriedly.

But he was unable to use it.

To his shock, the man scaled the wall of a house in one shot, and proceeded to leap onto the roof of the first floor, and then the second floor, disappearing upwards like a wild beast.

“I, is he a wildcat?! ”

“Could he... be the real Dark Owl, come out from the movie...”

Saburō’s exclaimed, and Yumasaki gave his own stunned commentary, but—

Seeing the fire extinguisher in Yumasaki’s hands, Saburō shouted in a panic.

“Oi Yumasaki! Keep that! We need to run!”

“What?! What about the Slugger?! Th, there’s still one more! The one who ran away!”

“We’ll deal with that later! It won’t mean anything if we get caught now!”

While he heard these panicked voices around him, Yahiro continued to gaze up at the roof the Dark Owl had escaped from.

“He... ran...?”

As he realised this, sweat broke out over Yahiro’s entire body.

It was impossible to tell if it was cold sweat or perspiration due to the intense workout.

Yahiro remained unable to make head or tails of his own feelings, conflicted, when a familiar voice called out to him from behind.

“Oi! Yahiro! What are you doing? You need to run too!”

“Ah... Okay!”

With another glance at the red lights of police cars flashing in the distance, Yahiro turned his back on the scene.

Yahiro stripped off the shadow mask and shirt as he ran.

Hugging the ball of shadow and running, he felt just slightly relieved.

The immediate threat was over.

But his fear had not yet faded completely.

His opponent could have merely made show of running away, planning to ambush him later.

Or they could have caught the eye of the police.

Or Saburō-san could get angry and chase him out of the apartment.

Fed by these normal fears, there was a new fear taking root.

It was of himself, whose ecstasy he had felt duelling the Slugger had been even greater than during the fight with Shizuo.

Even in the middle of a battle, Yahiro had felt that twinge of fear towards his own self.

Yahiro reached the main road, still feeling torn—

When a voice called out from behind him.

“Yahiro.”

When he spun warily, he saw something being thrown at him.

—Knife?! Acid?! Bomb?!

The possibilities flitted through his mind, and at the same time his sense of sight ascertained its identity, Yahiro caught the ‘smartphone’ from the air.

“You left it on the ground back there, you forgot. It looks broken, is that okay?”

The man shrugged as he spoke, and tilting his head curiously, Yahiro uttered his name.

“Kuronuma-sempai...? Why are you here?”

♂♀

Ikebukuro. An alley.

“H, Horada-san, what do we do!”

“Whatever, let’s just move away from the station! We need a strategic retreat first! We’ll figure it out later!”

As Horada said this, he was trembling in pain and terror in the passenger seat of the car his junior was now driving.

Horada, who had escaped through the basement of the station and managed to board his junior’s car, was for now just driving away from the city.

Because the main roads were congested, they were sticking to narrower back alleys.

“Damn it... What are they! This is even worse than colour gangs!”

Horada was shouting this when his phone rang.

“What! Who the fuck is calling at this... kind of time...”

Seeing the word ‘Izumii’ displayed on the screen, he blanched further and picked up the call.

“H, hello Izumii-san! It’s Horada!”

‘Now, quiz time.’

“Y, yes?”

‘Why is Horada-kun out of the hospital already, when he was meant to be there for a week?’

Horada’s teeth chattered at Izumii’s ‘quiz’.

Half the time Izumii had given ‘quizzes’ in this manner, he was even less sane than usual.

If handled poorly, even a trip to the hospital might not fix the resulting injury.

Even with these fears, Horada could not put together a good answer, and Izumii continued,

‘So? What’s the progress on the Slugger?’

“A, about that—”



Shirobishi Yōko continued to run.

—It’s the end. It’s over, it’s over, shit. Shit shit shitshitshitshitshit

She had fallen into despair.

That the police could track her down now her voice had been heard was **not on her mind at all**.

The dark shadows that had appeared right before her escape.

Completely unlike normal black clothes, as though shadow itself had coalesced to form an undulating cloth.

It was not simply the Headless Rider. And this unidentified being had not only shown up, but acted so as to obstruct her.

—Aahh, it’s the end. It’s the end for Ikebukuro.

—The gates of hell are open already. The demons are really spilling out!

—It’s not me. It’s not my fault.

—It’s the fault of those scum. Those scum, those scum... ●●●●● lower than maggots like the juice wrung from garbage those scum that embraced evil, it’s their fault the gates of hell have open!

—It’s the end for this city. I must end it. With my own hands.

—No, there's still time. I will save it, with my own hands.

—It can just burn. Burn the evil books.

—Buy a lighter from the store, and raze the streets of Ikebukuro.

—My own hands handd handshandshandshandshands h h h h h h h h
h

Saliva was dripping from her mouth, but Yōko continued to run like a woman possessed.

She was clearly not in her right mind.

Was it because of her terror, or because she had found a new purpose, or something else altogether?

Her confusion became euphoria, and as she ran, she felt no fatigue.

For she was running for the sake of Ikebukuro.

Running forward, forward towards the future—

When a car hit her from the side, and sent her flying.

♂♀

'What happened? That was loud.'

For a while after Izumii said this, Horada was unable to talk.

Because of the impact of something hitting the car, the injuries over his entire body were screaming.

"N, no... The car..."

"H, Horada-san, t, that's..."

A short distance ahead of the car, there was the silhouette of someone collapsed on the road.

—Don't fuck with me! I'm not dealing with the cops again!

—I didn't do it! It's not my fault!

Horada, still clutching the phone, alighted from the car to check if the person was still alive, but—

“...Burn...burnnn. The scum, kill the scum, the scum...”

Seeing the Dark Owl shaking while mumbling this, and the bandage-bound hammer in the person’s hand, Horada’s eyes widened.

‘Oi, what’s going on, say something, Horada.’

The voice from the phone brought him back to earth, and Horada put it to his ear again.

“S, sorry! Something cropped up!”

‘Whatever, just answer. You’ve found the Slugger, right? Yeah?’

“O, of course!”

‘...What?’

“Of course, Izumii-san! I’ve found the Slugger and punished her accordingly! I, I’ll pass her over, the rest is up to you~!”

♂♀

“U... ugh?”

Ajimura awoke to the inside of a van.

“Oh, you woke up. Or would saying ‘revived’ suit Dark Owl more?”

“Well, you’ll be in jail very soon, though.”

Seeing that he had awoken, a narrow-eyed man holding a bucket and a black-clad woman with a battery-charged soldering iron spoke out to him.

“Wh... Wha... What’s this?! ”

At this point he realised his arms and legs had been bound, and he began to squirm.

“Hey, don’t struggle, don’t struggle. Dark Owl’s got to be cool.”

“We should lower his body temperature so he’s like the real thing.”

Right as he said this, the slit-eyed man poured the dry ice in the bucket into Ajimura’s suit.

“~~~~~! ?! Ah... Aaaa!”

He screamed.

“Well well well, I was surprised that a Slugger would carry his driving license around, but the name was another shock. To think that the admin of that infamous OPD site’s the Slugger himself.”^(Y)

“Though if you think about how bad their rep is, it’s not surprising... I never imagined you were running the site under your real name.”^(K)

“Wh... B, bad rep?! Don’t fuck with me! We do everything to protect OPD! I cleaned the streets of trash like Horada and Heiwajima Shizuo! It was to protect Dark Owl’s reputation!”

Ajimura shrieked. The man and woman exchanged glances—and sighed, bone-weary.

“Becoming a hero that cleans up the streets, you say... Isn’t that completely against the theme of OPD, where the character has trouble even killing zombies and questions if he’s doing the right thing when he defeats the bad guy?”^(K)

“Seriously, even the bad guy Dark Owl declares themself evil and does evil proudly, right? What have you been watching? You’re even worse than fake fans!”^(Y)

“Shut up! That’s only on the surface! WWW writes ridiculous things like that because they’re licking the boots of capitalism! You don’t see the underlying theme, you casual!”

He yelled this egoistic opinion, but the slit-eyed man pushed him down.

“Gua... What are you... AAaaaAAAAaaah...”

Being pushed to the floor caused the dry ice in the suit to burn against his skin.

At Ajimura’s shrieking, the pair continued, eyes cold,

“I admit, we’re not fans. I can’t imagine real fans using violence to handle the series’ problems.”

“Right, you can’t see. Which reminds me... Did you know Dark Owl’s initial design was blind?”

The woman, as she said this, inched a soldering iron towards the man's eye.

"S, sto... N-N-NOOOOooOOooOOoo!"

Right before it could reach his eye, the door to the back of the van opened.

Ajimura perked up with the hope of rescue—but from the coldness of the eyes that flitted over him, his hopes were quickly dashed.

Then, the newcomer, a man with a bandana, sighed, and spoke to the man and woman.

"Oi... Don't get your priorities mixed up, okay?"

Kadota said from the open door. Karisawa and Yumasaki nodded successively.

"Don't worry, we're just asking how many comrades he has." (K)

"Aw~, I wish you'd trust us more~." (Y)

"...That's fine, but we're sending him to the police straight after. Don't forget that."

With that warning, Kadota called out to Saburō, who was outside.

"What happened to Yahiro?"

"I told him to go home before we came to pick up the Slugger. I couldn't possibly let him see this."

"I can't believe he's the rumoured Snake Hands."

"...I have no clue what's going on anymore."

Saburō said tiredly. Kadota asked,

"Are you going to scold him about it tomorrow?"

"Not really? I'm not like my my siblings; I have no right to say anything when it comes to fighting."

Saburō shrugged, and thinking of Yahiro's face, smiled bitterly at the sky. He said to Kadota,

"There's only one thing I can think of right now. The world's a dangerous place. I just hope he goes straight home without detouring anywhere."



Night time. Kuon's apartment. Rooftop.

"Shit... All those plans, wasted. Not one thing went right..."

Kuon, arms rested on the roof's railing, muttered irritated.

"What the hell... Mass appearance of Dark Owl...? That was never in the plan. Who the hell are they..."

Who had done it?

Thinking now, it could have been Underrars, whose web presence had been growing; or another prank-loving group passing it off as art.

Whichever the case, the public image of Dark Owl in Ikebukuro had changed drastically. All this meant was that the video of the Headless Rider and the Slugger would be less impactful, but to Kuon it was inexcusable.

—Everything was out of control.

—I should've been able to make more use of the Slugger...

Kuon tsked and sighed—

Only to hear, under the sound of his sigh and the wind, the door behind him opening.

"...Nee-chan?"

Only his sister knew he was here, but the one who stood there was not Nozomi—

"Yahiro...?"

Mizuchi Yahiro, in his casual clothes, stood there with his regular expression.

"Why are you here?"

"Mm, when I went to your place Nozomi-san pointed me here."

"If you wanted to talk you could just call."

"Sorry, I sort of broke my phone."

Yahiro said calmly. Kuon smiled and asked,

"I heard you fought the Slugger... what was that about?"

"Yeah, I fought Dark Owl. He was strong. I don't know who was inside, but I get the feeling Kuronuma-sempai knew."

"...Oi, wait, why is Aoba-san's name appearing?"

Kuon smiled and creased his brow at the same time, to which Yahiro replied, evenly,

"All the Dark Owl's that appeared in town today... **Almost all of them were from Blue Square.**"

"...Huh?! What?! Why would they..."

"They say they just wanted to show you up."

"?!"

Yahiro asked a question of the dismayed Kuon.

"Hey, Kuon-kun."

With an expression no different from usual, he asked, simply, calmly,

"Did you know that Ajimura guy was the criminal from the start?"



'As promised, I caught the Slugger, so I passed the culprit to the Blue Square member Kotonami Kuon-kun. What comes after is none of my business. Our debt's cleared.'

Aoba, seeing Celty's message, smiled wryly and murmured,

"So that's how you're playing it."

It was no surprise.

Likely she had seen through the odd relationship between Kuon and Blue Square and chosen this course of action.

"But to think Celty-san knew Kuon was one of us... She's surprisingly perceptive to things like that."

"By the way, what are we gonna do about Kuon? He really went too far this time, didn't he?"

"Worst case, even Blue Square will get dragged through the mud."

Aoba replied to his gang members,

"Isn't that fine? We have so much dirt on us already."

"Oh, it's on the news already... I wonder how much Kuon's sister will pay for that advance notice."

"Yoshikiri did a good job, too. I have to call him and say thanks later."

Aoba and company chuckled as they discussed their 'assignment' today.

"Ha, I wonder what face Kuon is making right now."

"Well, won't he think it was Underrars that did it? He probably never expected us to bypass him and make a deal with Nozomi-san directly."

Aoba drank his juice imagining the embittered face of his junior, and added,

"Well, what happens to him next... will depend on that friend of his."

"Since I just told him everything."



"Aoba-san... knew what I was doing all along?"

"Since about last month... after the fake kidnapping case he's been monitoring you, apparently? Very secretly. It seems Aoba-san keeps an eye on the internet too."

"That's creepy. Is he a stalker?"

Kuon had spoken jokingly, but before Yahiro, whose face remained blank, his smile faded.

"...So what did he say I did?"

"Mmm... I don't know the details, but he said that he put everything together in the last few days. That once he realised the Slugger you had identified was Ajimura, he suspected that you had been instigating everything since you found out."

"..."

"He said there was someone on Ajimura's site pretending to be his ally, giving him information about delinquents. When that person started pushing Ajimura about how bad Horada-san was, Aoba-san thought it might be you."

It had all been planned.

Kuon had found out about Ajimura through the same process he had told Celty.

But the timing was different.

His sister had informed him Ajimura was suspicious even before Yumasaki and Karisawa's commission.

He knew the culprit's identity.

With this advantage, what couldn't he do?

Could he manipulate the Slugger into attacking specific people?

There had been no ulterior motive.

If one had to say, it would be that controlling the Slugger in itself had been the objective.

Was he capable of it? Kuon's greatest motive had been to find the answer to that question.

It had been a test.

To test his own nature; **if he could become Orihara Izaya.**

Kuon reaffirmed this to himself, and still unsmiling, he glared at Yahiro.

"Yeah, that's right."

"..."

"I knew even before the holidays. And I was the one who pitted Ajimura against Horada."

Up to that point things had been comically straightforward.

Kuon had accepted Yumasaki and Karisawa's commission nonchalantly, and had passed the job on to Yahiro and others while being aware of the perpetrator.

He had succeeded in targeting Horada, who had been troublesome as he seemed intent to entangle Yahiro with Blue Square more than necessary. It had been a vague plan of his to have Yahiro nab Ajimura under his Snake Hands

identity right after, which would not only act as publicity for Snake Hands but also cause Horada to be indebted to them.

At that point—things had gone awry.

Third party interference.

Another Slugger had turned up, aiding the assault of Horada.

Who it was was irrelevant. The issue was that someone besides himself had influenced Ajimura.

Hence Kuon, sensing danger on the horizon, had ceased all interference in favour of monitoring the situation.

At that point Ajimura seemed determined to seek out Heiwajima Shizuo anyway, so Kuon had stayed quiet, waiting for Ajimura to attack Shizuo.

There was no way Ajimura could have done anything to Shizuo.

It was supposed to end when he faced Shizuo's counterattack; then Kuon would have passed him over to Yumasaki and Karisawa.

But instead of Shizuo, Ajimura had targeted his superior Tanaka Tom.

Kuon, who had been watching the situation on the scene, had at that point concluded that it was impossible to control Ajimura.

That was why he had used Celty for emergency disposal.

"And? What if I did?"

Kuon said, defiantly.

He might be able to talk his way through if he tried, but since he did not know how much evidence Kuronuma Aoba had procured, it was pointless.

"Even if I say I knew the culprit and pretended not to even when that Horada guy or Shizuo's sempai were targeted, what are you going to do about it?"

—Yeah.

—I've already decided to become a person like Orihara Izaya. What need is there for me to get along with Yahiro?

—It's normal to be disliked, or looked down on, or despised, right?

—Yeah, that's right. If I'm Orihara Izaya, that makes this guy Heiwajima Shizuo, huh.

—Well, I'm not opposed to that.

Even if he and the boy in front of him wound up trying to kill one another, that was fine with him.

Kuon said these things to himself as he waited for Yahiro to answer.

But—

“That’s alright, then.”

“....Huh?”

“Ah, I just wanted to make sure. If that’s what really happened then it’s alright. Thanks.”

Yahiro nodded as though reassured, and seeing this Kuon gaped blankly for a moment; before, grinding his teeth angrily, he said,

“...What’s alright about this. You came all the way to my house just for this?”

Replying, Yahiro said with a tone no different at all from how he usually spoke casually,

“If it wasn’t true, I was thinking I had to go to Kuronuma-sempai right after and tell him he got it wrong.”

“...What?”

The unexpected reply threw Kuon off so much he forgot even his anger.

But with Yahiro’s next words, he was able to accept Yahiro’s reasoning.

“It’s not nice to have misunderstandings about you spreading around. But if it’s true then it’s fine. If this is what you want, I won’t say anything.”

Yahiro had had a lonely, dangerous adolescence because he was rumoured to be a ‘monster’ in spite of his own intentions. He had simply been trying to prevent Kuon from suffering that same fate.

—This guy...

—He really came here just for that?

“Are you really fine with just that?”

“Why?”

“You have a bastard like me right in front of you and the power to do anything you like to me, and you just let things be?! It’s like you think it’s someone else’s business!”

“...”

“Or...”

Kuon cut himself off, shocked.

—I... What was I just going to say?

—“Or... do you not give a damn about me at all?”

Realising what he had been about to say, he truly paled.

Before a silent Kuon, Yahiro thought for some time about what he had just been told—

Finally, after assembling his thoughts somewhat, he tried to verbalise them.

“Ahhh... Kuon-kun, you’re planning to become someone like that Orihara Izaya person, right?”

“Damn it, Nee-chan, always talking too much. ...So what of it?”

“But isn’t that meaningless?”

“...What? What are you trying to say?”

Kuon’s brows creased angrily as Yahiro cornered him with his words.

Even knowing there was no winning if they fought, there was a line he could not back down from.

“Am I wrong? Is it so wrong for me to want to save my sister?”

“I don’t think you’re wrong. But I think you’re going about it the wrong way.”

“...”

In the face of Yahiro’s blunt statement, Kuon found himself stumped for words.

"I can't put it in words it that well... It's just something that bothers me... When Orihara Izaya disappeared, your sister got into a really bad state, right? And that's why you want to become Orihara Izaya, so she can go back to how she was before... That was what you decided, right?"

"...Yeah."

"But... then, what if you die?"

"...Huh?"

The question was like an unexpected blow.

While his friend was wide-eyed, Yahiro, thinking seriously, wove his words one by one.

"If you're gone, then won't the same thing happen again...? To your sister? Then, how can your sister be happy when you're not around...?"

"..."

"So I think, for your sister to be able to live independently even after you're gone... you can't become Orihara Izaya, Kuon-kun."

Yahiro himself seemed uncertain if what he was saying was right, and nervous he might have made a mistake; even so, he looked Kuon in the eye and continued to state his opinion.

"I can't say it very well, but... **I think the only way is for you to be even greater than Orihara Izaya.** To truly become someone who can make your sister happy, I think?"

At the end he tilted his head as if doubting himself, wondering if there might be a better solution.

Seeing him like that, Kuon was quiet for a while.

And then the anger faded from his face, replaced by a small smile, and he answered,

"...That's enough. Go home."

"Ah, sorry? Maybe that was inappropriate."

"Yeah, go home. I said already, I hate this nice guy part of you."

“...I see. Sorry.”

He was expressionless still, but after looking away somewhat regretfully, Yahiro turned away from Kuon.

“Ah...”

Kuon started, as if to call out, but could not form words.

When it became apparent Yahiro would keep walking, the false smile on his face faded, and with eyes that seemed close to crying, he spoke.

“...Wait.”

“Yeah?”

By the time Yahiro turned back, Kuon had reverted to his usual smirk.

Then, with a voice light as always,

“You said it a while ago? That you’ll always be ready to hit me?”

“Yeah.”

Still no different from usual, Kuon said,

“Now’s that time. Hit me. Stop me.”

The next moment—

“Got it.”

Like a professional boxer, Yahiro’s right fist made a sharp right straight towards Kuon’s bowed head, directly into his right cheek.

Kuon was thrown back violently, and his back slammed back into the railing of the roof.

Then, before he could even feel the pain, he went under the darkness.

♂♀

20 minutes later.

Kuon woke up to find his entire face throbbing with a dull pain.

A broad sky stretched out before him, but for all there were stars some were obscured by the neon lights of the city, so it could not quite be described as starry.

Looking to the side he saw Yahiro sitting beside his prone form, leaning against the railing.

“Are you okay?”

“Owowow...”

Pain flared through his face when he tried to move. Something warm and metallic-tasting spread in his mouth.

“You... really didn’t... hold back.”

“Yeah. You were smiling, but I felt your eyes were serious. So I thought, I had do it seriously, too...”

Yahiro replied unhesitantly. Kuon, desperately enduring the pain, smiled.

“I could’ve died from that, you dumb bastard...”

Kuon spat into his hand. What came out was a lot of blood, and two broken teeth.

“They broke.”

“Yeah, you should see a dentist ASAP.”

As Yahiro said this, he stroked the back of his hand.

He did not know if Kuon knew the countless scars there were from the broken teeth of others; Kuon only moaned, grumbling at Yahiro.

“Gguah... Guh... Dammit... you’re so useless.”

There Yahiro tilted his head, and replied,

“Kuon-kun, I don’t think you’re much better.”

“...Hey, you just hit me so ruthlessly... It’s weird to still call me -kun. You can drop that... It’ll just make me feel gross.”

“Is that how it works?”

“That’s how it works.”

Yahiro tilted his head, and Kuon returned the gesture bearing the pain in his face.

Yahiro, hearing this, nodded solemnly.

"All right, I'll just call you Kuon from now on."

Then, with that solemn face, he asked Kuon a question.

"I wonder if I could just call Himeka-chan Himeka too?"

"That's... kinda... personally unforgiveable."

"I see... Sorry. Though I'm not sure why you're angry, Kuon."

Yahiro said dejectedly. Kuon looked at him, and simply continued to smile through the pain.

He felt as though if he stopped smiling, he would cry.

The useless boy gazed up at the quiet, starry sky, and never, never stopped smiling.



エピローグ



Epilogue

The next day. Shinra's apartment.

It was the day after the long weekend.

The afternoon news announced that **three assaulters** had been arrested without warrant.

Two of them were copycat offenders; one was a man who claimed to be an OPD fan but was disliked by the fan community, which saw him as a radical. The other was a woman who had attacked OPD relentlessly online and even published several statements addressing the mass media. Seeing the possibility that the woman could have an accomplice in the organisation she had founded, the police were continuing the investigation.

Both had been wounded and absolutely terrified, repeating cryptic things such as, 'The Headless Rider is the Slugger,' or, 'There was a demon,' and so the police would continue their interrogation while suspecting abuse of dangerous or illegal drugs.

But what stunned the public most was that the original Slugger was also nabbed at the same time.

It was a newly employed hostess at a cabaret club, who had discovered a man who had rejected her horribly in the past was now dating another hostess at the same club, and assaulted the couple wearing a random piece of clothing she had at home that could cover her face.

'I never thought it would turn out this way in the end.'

Now aware of the full picture, Celty slumped her shoulders wearily.

"It just means that human jealousy is a scary thing, influence of manga or not."

'But that woman was an OPD fan, right? OPD will still be slammed for this in the end, won't it?'

"I dunno. Both copycats said they were inspired by the news reports, so they'll probably return to their senses with the right push and it'll just blow

over, I think? Besides, the anti-OPD leader was one of the Sluggers.”

‘The world can be horrible. Well, the true culprit was a hostess, but people can’t be hating on all hostesses, at least.’

Shinra smiled at the text Celty had typed, and said,

“Yeah, that’s true. It’s human envy that should be blamed. The cardinal sin of all humans, even me.”

‘Shinra, if I cheated on you, would you put on a cosplay and try to beat me up?’

“No way. I’ve calmed down these past few days.”

Shinra’s countenance had indeed tempered. Celty asked him,

‘Then what would you do?’

“...Cry; cry like no tomorrow. There’d be a grown man in front of Ikebukuro station bawling and wailing your name in broad daylight.”

‘Don’t, that’s even worse for the people watching! ...Wait, I remember having this conversation before...’

As she typed this Celty felt at peace.

Things had been bumpy after their return from their vacation, but she felt that perhaps finally, they had returned to their version of everyday life.

While the TV began to report the details on the nabbing of the Slugger , the internet was in commotion over the appearance of a Dark Owl crowd in front of Ikebukuro Station.

Celty, reading the article, asked Shinra,

‘I wonder whose doing this was? It must have been a prank, since they escaped once the police arrived without hurting anyone.’

At that, after some thought, Shinra offered his own hypothesis with an irritated face.

“Eh, it must’ve been Aoba and co, right? You said Blue Square’s been teaming up with an aggregate website, right? Shouldn’t it be related to that?”

Shinra’s theory hit the nail on the head, but they had no way to obtain immediate proof.

'Wasn't it a self-proclaimed artistic display by that Underrars group?'

"It can't be, the demon hammer Bannanjin...?"

'Th, there's no way it's an alien conspiracy, right?'

As they exchanged theories, Celty suddenly remembered Kuon.

—That boy complicated things again; he seems to like scheming.

—First it was Izaya, then Mikado-kun, Aoba-kun, Kuon-kun; is Raira jinxed to have evil masterminds?

—Ah well, but Kuon-kun's cuter than Izaya, at least.

—What can I say, Izaya was wrecking the city with Shizuo since high school...

At this point, Celty paled mentally.

'I forgot about Shizuo!'

"What?"

'The Slugger! I passed him to Karisawa!'

The peaceful atmosphere from before turned completely, and Celty collapsed onto the sofa gloomily.

'Aaaaaah, how do I apologise...'

♂♀

Raira Academy. After school. Rooftop.

"You look sleepy, Yahiro-kun."

"I do?"

"You do."

Yahiro tilted his head, to which Himeka gave an expressionless reply.

Yahiro was sitting at the corner of the rooftop as he had this exchange.

He told Himeka truthfully about what had happened the day before and the fight with the Sluggers, though he kept secret about Kuon.

"Fu~n... But, how did you know that woman was the Slugger?"

"Um... When she looked our way there was this, I don't know, like, killing

intent...? She was giving off this aura, like she really, really wanted to come over and hit someone... I thought it must have been me. Since I got that look a lot back in Akita."

Yahiro had thought she could have been one of the culprits of the fake kidnappings who had discovered his identity and had a grudge against him, or a person who had had a family member hurt by him back in his time in Akita, and wanted revenge.

But when the hostile gaze had vanished after Yumasaki and Karisawa had departed, the thought had struck that perhaps it was one of them that had been the target, and he had decided it would be best to check on them in case it was really the Slugger.

"In the past there was someone who was glaring like that while throwing a Molotov at me... So I got worried about Yumasaki-san."

"So you just happened to meet her eyes."

"? Not exactly? It's more like I was looking at everyone around and found her..."

"Huh?"

Himeka asked, stumped.

"I mean... When I was a kid people would always attack me in the middle of the street, so... I have this habit of watching the face of everyone I can see."

Yahiro replied frankly. Resigned, Himeka said,

"Do you mean you treat everyone who walks past you on the street as a threat? Wait, even now, are you on your guard in case anyone attacks us here on the roof?"

"Yeah."

Yahiro nodded promptly. Himeka heaved a sigh, and a small smile came onto her face.

"You really are weird."

"Really?"

“Really.”

Yahiro tilted his head, to which Himeka nodded kindly.

“I see... Maybe, I’m weird?”

Yahiro consulted her on one more thing.

The instant of killing intent he had experienced when fighting the Slugger—and how he had enjoyed it.

Himeka listened seriously to the end, and spoke after some thought.

“If you beat me up and murdered me right now, would you enjoy it?”

“No way...”

“And Kuon-kun? And everyone else you’re watching up here on the roof?”

“I don’t even want to imagine.”

Yahiro answered seriously. Himeka replied,

“Then I think that’s fine for now.”

“Really?”

“I can’t say I’m an expert on psychology, but you have many people to confide in, so if you just do that instead of bottling everything up something will change, right?”

Although she was expressionless, likely she was truly, with her own brand of seriousness, concerned about Yahiro.

Yahiro felt her warmth, and nodded, smiling.

“...I see, thanks. I’ll talk to Kuon, too.”

“Oh, you’re not using honorifics anymore.”

“Yeah, stuff happened.”

As he said this, Yahiro suddenly felt worried for Kuon.

—He said he’d take the day off to see a dentist... I wonder if he’s okay.

Hoping he hadn’t collapsed somewhere because of the injury from Yahiro.

Somewhere in Ikebukuro. A park.

True to expectation, Kuon had collapsed.

But it was not Yahiro's punch that had caused this.

He had been punched by a completely different man, and was lying on the ground.

A few minutes ago—

Kuon had been standing in front of Shizuo and Tom, who had had a bandage around his head, while they were in the park having a break.

"Yo, Shizuo-san and... Tom-san? Your head injury was pretty bad, huh?"

"Huh? Aren't you the friend of that Yahiro guy?"

Shizuo asked, suspiciously, while Tom asked,

"...How did you know I was hurt?"

"Of course I do. I was the one who encouraged the Slugger and made him attack you."

Readily declared.

Then Kuon proceeded to chatter on about the entire story to Shizuo.

Unabashedly, as offensively as possible, even going so far as to mention the man's younger brother.

As a result, expectedly, Heiwajima Shizuo exploded.

At the sight of Shizuo's incoming figure, Kuon thought: this would do.

With this, he would have taken responsibility, in his own way.

He had considered Horada an enemy from the start, so he had no intention of apologising on that front. He was not planning to be that much of a good person. But if he failed to make amends for involving Tom, an innocent bystander, it would be an insult to his pride as the one who had so arrogantly thought he had been in control of the situation.

And—he would probably never be able to surpass Orihara Izaya like that.

It was a choice he made with determination.

—If this kills me... Sorry, Nee-chan.

Under the pressure of Shizuo, his sister's face appeared in his mind—

In the end, Kuon fell to the ground immediately after that.

But it was not due to Shizuo's fatal blow.

Tom had cut in from the side and punched Kuon's face without mercy.

The punch had sunk in where the injury from Yahiro's had been. Combined with how unexpected it was, Kuon crumbled on the spot.

"Tom-san, why..."

In front of a startled Shizuo, Tom said, coolly,

"I was the victim here. So I hit him. Is there a problem?"

Unlike his usual self, there was no room for argument in his eyes.

Understanding his intent, Shizuo let his anger disperse, and shook his head.

"...No, there's no problem."

And so things led to the present.

"Hey, why did you come to us? Things would've blown over if you'd just kept quiet."

Tom asked quizzically. Kuon, still lying on his back, replied.

"...A troublesome urban legend convinced me...Would you believe me if I said that?"

It was not a lie, but Kuon intended it as a full-blown provocation.

For some reason Kuon did not want to lie; and by referring to Yahiro as the urban legend Snake Hands, he presented the truth as an insult.

He expected Shizuo to grow enraged again at these words that could only be seen as mockingly unserious—

But the two still standing exchanged glances, and nodded in understanding.

Then Shizuo, after leaving the following words, departed.

"I got it. On that urban legend's account, I'll let you off today."

After the duo had left, Kuon, still sprawled in the middle of the park, rubbed his cheek.

—Oww... Shit, another tooth might've come out...

—Well, if Shizuo had punched me I might really have died, so...

“...Huh?”

At that point, Kuon suddenly realise why Tom had punched him.

“Did... that old guy Tom... protect me?”

Indeed, punching Kuon first might have been the only way to placate Shizuo back in that situation.

In other words, the man had saved Kuon despite knowing Kuon had caused his injury.

“Shit... Damn it... Damn it...”

Looking up at the sky, Kuon covered his eyes with his arm, and felt humiliated at how powerless he was.

And, as if scolding his own self, he spoke from his bleeding mouth:

“This is why... I hate humans.”

♂♀

“...I’m sorry, Tom-san.”

“About what?”

“If I hit him, things might have gotten too serious to talk out of. And now I think of it, it seems he came to take responsibility **after Celty talked to him.**”

“Don’t worry about it. I collected on my own debt, that’s all. I really wanted to beat up the actual Slugger bastard, but I’ll leave things to the police.”

Tom said this with a shrug, and rubbed his knuckles with a grimace.

“I haven’t hit anyone in a long time... I doubt anything’s broken, but it hella hurts.”

Tom, examined his hand, sighing, to which Shizuo responded,

“Do you want to see that guy for a check-up again? He has no X-ray, though.”



One hour later. Shinra's apartment.

When Celty returned home, Shizuo and Tom were just leaving.

"Yo, Celty."

'Sh, Shizuo!'

—Crap! I'm not mentally prepared yet!

—Sigh, I'll just have to straighten up and apologise...

With this decision, Celty was about to type something, but Shizuo bowed his head deeply towards her.

"Thanks. Looks like you've been looking out for us."

—What?

Celty was confused. Tom added,

"Really, I expected he'd have to be tied up tight to be brought to us, but to think you convinced him to come of his free will... That's really impressive."

—? ? ?

"Well, we have to go back to work now. I'll thank you properly the next time we meet."

Patting a clueless Celty's shoulder, Shizuo and Tom smiled gratefully and left to continue their work.

Celty, who understood nothing of the situation, was left stranded at the doorway.

—Wha...

—What's going on?!

Had she lost her memory without knowing?

At the thought that a UFO might have abducted her, she went weak with shock and began crying into Shinra's chest—

But that is another story.

Next Prologue

Raira Academy. Cafeteria.

With regards to the series of events, OPD creator WWW made the following comment.
‘We have no comment as to the group of Dark Owls that appeared outside the station. However, one thing can be said. Did the influence of Dark Owl compel those people to do this? Certainly that is possible. Everyone has their own Dark Owl and The Owl in their heart. A heart of evil, and a heart of justice. Like an angel and a demon. But if a person falls to the temptations of the demon and commits murder, no one can ask for the Bible to be censored, can they? OPD is hardly on the same level as the Bible; it’s only a work of fiction. I urge everyone to remember that.’

Reading the comment on her smartphone, Orihara Mairu said,
“So in the end, all the stuff you did was used as advertising for OPD, huh Aocchi~”
“Hm...? Yeah... First it was the Underrars, saying it was their own art, and now someone from higher up’s snatched the limelight. ...Wait, who told you?!”
Aoba replied distractedly. Mairu and Kururi, who were having lunch with him, complained, “We heard from Kuon-cchi! Those Sluggers and whatnot gave a bad rep to people like us, the Alliance of People Wearing Mascot Pajamas Around in Broad Daylight! To think the organisation that spread this prejudice turns out to be Blue Square!”

“...Bewilderment...”
“S, sorry, sorry. I’ll do my best to raise the standing of mascot pajamas as recompense.” Even as he listened to the twins’ grievances with him, mentally, Aoba was consumed by an uneasiness from another source.
He remembered the phone call he had had with Yoshikiri on that night.

—“Yo, Yoshikiri. Well done. It’s thanks to you we got to know just how strong Yahiro is.”
—‘Wha?’
—“But I never realised you were so light on your feet. Maybe you were dodging the whole while, but going eye-to-eye with Yahiro’s a feat in itself. Does that mean you can even fight Heiwajima Shizuo?”
—‘What are you talking about?’
—“Huh... No, I mean... I mean our plan; you dressed as one of the Sluggers to attack Yahiro and we filmed it from afar? You climbed onto the roof and escaped after, right?”
—‘Huh? You didn’t check your phone?’
—”?”
—‘I fucking texted you that I got lost and went home to sleep!’

Afterwards, looking through the video they had taken secretly from a distance—the

Slugger who fought Yahiro indeed seemed to move much faster than Yoshikiri. Relooking Yahiro's movements objectively, Yoshikiri was on that level at all.

—If only we had a 'Snake Hands defeats the Slugger!' video.

Aoba had felt a deep unease watching this video they had filmed for some small cash.

Yet at the same time, it sent a prickling thrill through him.

—That Dark Owl... Just who was inside?

♂♀

Somewhere in the city. A rented office.

It was a small rented office in a certain building.

In a chair in the middle of the room, face still wrapped in bandages, Shijima sat.

But the person who stood beside him today was not Earthworm.

It was a young man, wearing Dark Owl mascot pajamas with a torn mouth.

"So how was the Snake Hands guy?"

At Shijima's question, the man grinned, and answered,

"He's good, Shijima-san. Strong, super strong!"

"I see. At least something came of observing those Sluggers, even if it was unexpected."

Shijima began to contemplate the Sluggers further, as though he had been monitoring all of the criminals all along.

"I was keeping an eye on them since they were on the edge already, ready to give them a little push with my drugs... But they went over without the drugs anyway. How strange, that people on opposite sides ended up on the same path."

Shijima mused, impressed. The other man, who, while tall, could be called a boy still, replied,

"They're not even opposites. They were all trash, weren't they?"

The boy giggled. Shijima replied,

"...Yeah, you're right. You, me, all of us are trash."

"We really are~."

The boy spoke innocently. Shijima dropped his eyes.

The smartphone in his hand showed the video of the fight between Dark Owl and Snake Hands, but from a different angle from Aoba's.

"Hey."

Watching the movements of the Dark Owl in the video, Shijima asked the boy calmly,

"Are you really human?"

"What, you sound like you know people who aren't human."

"Yeah, a couple. Had bad experiences, too. So what are you? Jami."

"I dunno? I'm not sure myself. But..."

Eyes flashing bestially, the boy, Jami, simply smiled.

And recalling the urban legend garbed in black shadow, and the murderous intent the man

had shown for that one instant—
The boy merely continued to smile, innocent, yet malicious.

“Maybe he will be the one to teach me.”

